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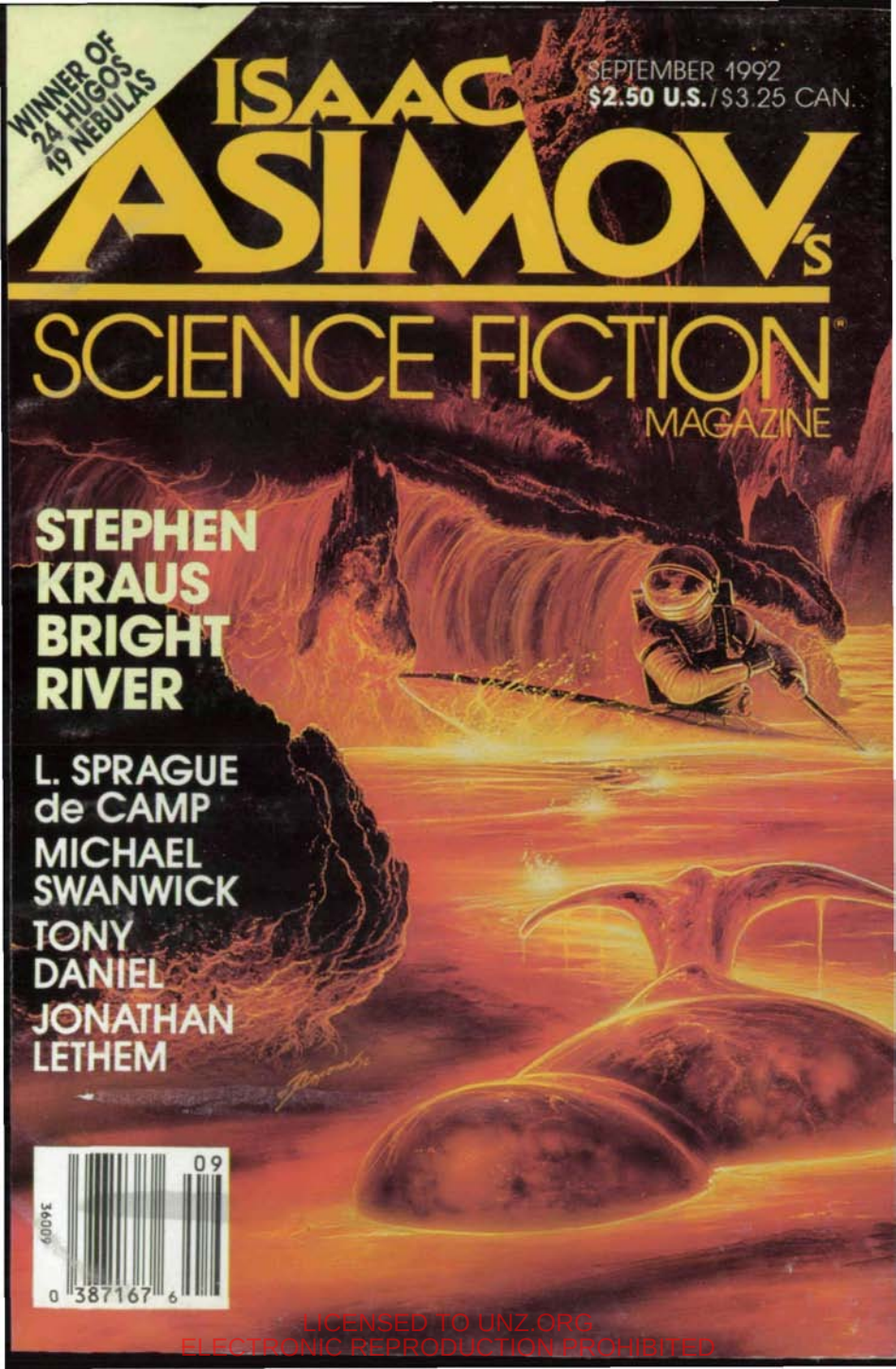

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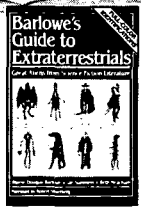

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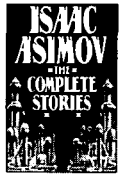

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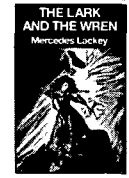

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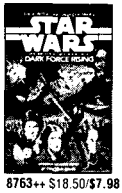

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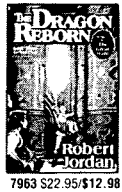

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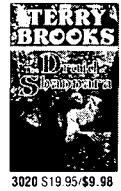

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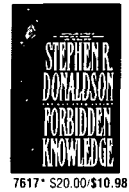

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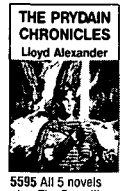

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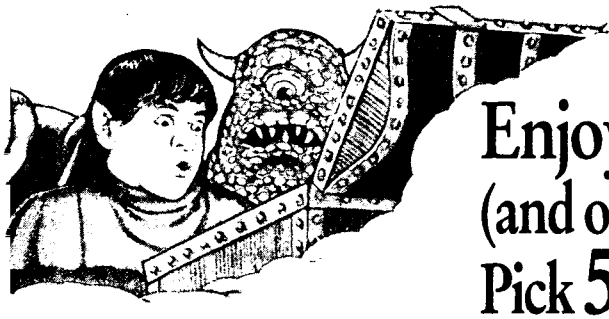

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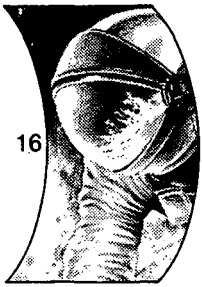

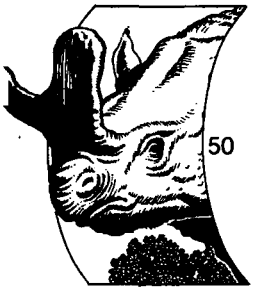

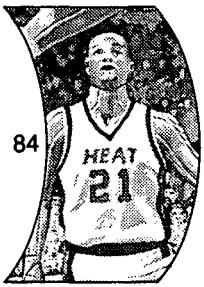

Stories from *IAsfm* have won seventeen Hugos and nineteen Nebula Awards, and our editors have received seven Hugo Awards for Best Editor. *IAsfm* was also the 1991 recipient of the *Locus* Award for Best Magazine.

ISAAC ASIMOV'S SCIENCE FICTION® MAGAZINE

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September 1992
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August 18, 1992

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EDITORIAL by Gardner Dozois

CHANGES

One of the great messages of science fiction is that change is inevitable. No one knew this better than Isaac Asimov—and now, alas, change has come even to the magazine that bears his name.

As most of you probably know by now, Isaac Asimov died on April 6, 1992, at the age of seventy-two, after a long illness. His wife Janet and his daughter Robyn were at his bedside, and his ending was peaceful, as befits a man who devoted much of his life to the cause of promoting peace here on Earth.

There's little need to rehash his accomplishments *here,* I suspect. He was probably the most famous science fiction writer of the last half of the twentieth century, and his nonfiction undoubtedly influenced thousands of young people to seek careers in the sciences over the last few decades. There are few people in the science fiction field about whom one can use the expression "a great man" without blushing, but Isaac Asimov was one of them. He *was* a Great Man, by any reasonable definition of the term.

You'll be hearing a lot in the days to come about Isaac's intelligence and encyclopedic knowlege, but what impressed me the most about him was his integrity. A highly ethical man, a man who held doggedly to his own sharply defined set of values, Isaac never backed down from supporting what he believed in, or from speaking out against what he felt was wrong, even when those opinions were unpopular or even potentially dangerous. Even in the darkest days of the '80s, when it seemed that we were on our way to a new bout of McCarthyism, and another man might have found it expedient, or more comfortable, or more prudent, to keep his silence, Isaac would not. Isaac, in some ways the mildest of men, was fearless in this regard, and never hesitated to take controversial public stances on politics or social issues or religion, even in a climate in which such controversy could have hurt the sales of his magazine or damaged his own reputation. He had the courage of his convictions. Even toward the end, when he was weak and tired and sick, and dozens of fools were writing letters to *IAsfm* saying that his illness was God's

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punishment for his atheism, he never wavered in his principles, or sought comfort in self-delusion —he knew what was coming, and faced it unflinchingly. There were no deathbed recantations for Isaac Asimov.

The magazine that you are holding in your hands was extremely important to Isaac. He believed fiercely that science fiction needs short-fiction markets in order to keep changing and growing as a genre, and that magazines such as this one provide a vital forum for the development of new young writers; he knew that without a constant influx of those new young writers, science fiction itself, a field that he loved, must inevitably stagnate and die. The last piece of writing Isaac Asimov ever did, in fact, was an editorial for us—entitled "Sold!" (published last month in our August issue)—in which he celebrated the fact that, after a few years of going through risky economic times, the magazine had been sold to a prosperous and stable publishing company, and that *that* sale would insure that the magazine that he loved and which bears his name would continue into the future . . . a future that he knew very well that he himself would never see.

And continue it will. Our new owners, Dell Magazines, and our new publisher, Christoph Haas-Heye, are as devoted as we are to continuing Isaac's legacy. And so each month we will continue to bring you the very best science fiction being written today, stories by both the Biggest Names in the business *and* by those rising new young stars on whom the future of the genre depends. There will be no change in our product, no dilution of quality, no diminishment of our commitment to bring you the best of the best. Isaac had received assurances of this before he died, and, in one of the last conversations I ever had with him, talked about how pleased he was to have lived long enough to have seen his magazine through to a safe harbor. It was one of Isaac's fondest wishes that *Isaac Asimov's Science Fiction Magazine* would continue on for years after his death, just as *Alfred Hitchcock's Mystery Magazine* and *Ellery Queen's Mystery Magazine* have continued on for decades after the deaths of *their* founders. He considered this magazine to be his legacy, his gift to the field that he loved, and all of us here will do our best not to let him down.

There will, of course, inevitably, be changes. There will be no more of the Editorials for which Isaac was justly renowned, and we will make no real attempt to replace them. From time to time, we may feature a Guest Editorial (we have one coming up next month, in fact, by Connie Willis, commissioned by us when Isaac was ill and in danger of missing his deadline for the first time in the history of the magazine), from time to time I may take this space if I have something topical that needs to be said, from time to time we may reprint a piece

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ISAAC ASIMOV'S SCIENCE FICTION MAGAZINE

congratulates the winners of the 1991 Nebula Awards
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Best Novel
Stations of the Tide
by Michael Swanwick
(*IAsfm*, 13/90-1/91)

Best Novella
"Beggars in Spain"
by Nancy Kress
(*IAsfm*, 4/91)

Best Novelette
"Guide Dog"
by Mike Conner

Best Short Story
"Ma Qui"
by Alan Brennert

Ray Bradbury Dramatic Script Award
Terminator 2: Judgment Day
by James Cameron & William Wisher

by Isaac himself if it seems appropriate. There will be no regular monthly Editorial, though, and certainly not one by me. Isaac was a genius and a polymath, and an expert on a bewildering variety of subjects and academic disciplines—I am none of these things, and there is no particular reason why anyone should be any more interested in *my* opinion on astronomy or Shakespeare or Faster Than Light drives than they would be in anyone *else's* opinion. *My* talent is finding good stories for the magazine, and that's what I intend to concentrate on. You can't replace an Isaac Asimov, and I'm smart enough not to even attempt to *try*.

The letter column will continue as usual, although now, alas, the letters will be answered, when an answer seems called for, by me or by Sheila Williams rather than by Isaac.

Our November issue, our special Double Issue, will feature a number of memorial tributes to Isaac by friends and colleagues such as Arthur C. Clarke, Harlan Ellison, Connie Willis, Ben Bova, L. Sprague de Camp, Poul and Karen Anderson, Shawna McCarthy, and many others, and, in a later issue, probably Mid-December, we will be featuring a letter column made up of the best tributes to Isaac that we receive from *you,* the readers.

And so the magazine will continue—although Tuesdays, Isaac's usual day to visit the office, will be a little lonely around here from now on.

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Isaac was a great boss. He picked people whom he trusted, and then *trusted* them, a rare quality in business these days. He left his editors alone, giving them total creative freedom, making no attempt to second-guess their choice of material—but, at the same time, he was always there to support us if we needed it, and fought for our right to publish stories that contained explicit sex and the use of obscenities, even though such stories were not to his own personal taste.

In my early years at *IAsfm,* he was a great booster of office morale; everyone looked forward to his visits, and he would often spend much of his time in the office telling jokes or one of his inexhaustible store of funny anecdotes, or singing, or reciting intricate limericks that he would make up on the spot, often to order.

Even toward the end, when he was in his final illness, and knew it he was never less than polite and considerate, always apologetic for any inconveniences the increasing feebleness of his body might cause us, always concerned about our feelings and our problems, even in the face of much greater problems of his own.

It worried him that people would mourn him, that his passing would cause grief and sadness in others. He would have preferred to somehow slip unnoticed from this life, unmissed, but this is one of the few ambitions that Isaac will be unable to achieve. He *will* be missed. We will not see his like again. ●

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LETTERS

Dear Dr. Asimov:

I just wanted to comment on your Mid-December editorial. First, I believe that there are indeed other life forms wandering about the Cosmos and that they will visit us someday. Second, I agree that the word "Alien," as you have put it, was indeed a shortened version first used by early science fiction writers to describe extraterrestrials. Back then science fiction was such a new toy that not many people really understood it. I am twenty-four years old and have been an SF reader for about eleven years. I have watched SF emerge from just a dream to an enjoyable reality. I have enjoyed reading SF and fantasy long enough to watch it grow into, as Arthur Clarke put it, the only thing that is reality. I am not quoting him exactly, but I read something like that in one of his books. What I am trying to say is that then people really didn't know enough about science and SF to know what aliens would be like. Nobody really know what to expect from ET's. But I guess you do.

The third point that I would like to discuss with you is about that TV show that you and Ben Bova saw some years ago. Well I saw it too and at first I was not too terribly impressed with it. But then that was before I really got interested in science fiction. I started watching SF TV long before I started reading it. The show was not that great (as opposed to "Star Trek",) but then again what is? The more I think about it the science was rather bad, but at the time I didn't know better. Well I have taken up enough of your time. By the way I will be sending your magazine a story sometime within the next few months.

Yours truly,

David Robinson
Fultondale, AZ

I hate to disagree but I doubt that we will ever meet aliens.

—Isaac Asimov

Dear Dr. Asimov,

Sir, you floor me. "Forward the Foundation" was enthralling and I can't wait for the hardcover to come out so I can snatch it off the bookstand and fork over your vigorish. I actually thought of passing the story over because I'm so far behind in the "Foundation" scheme of things. I've only read the first three books of the series and only the first of the robot series (also *I, Robot*, but I think it dealt with different characters).

I've enjoyed your short work for years. Your Rodney robot stories,

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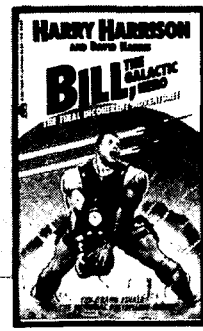

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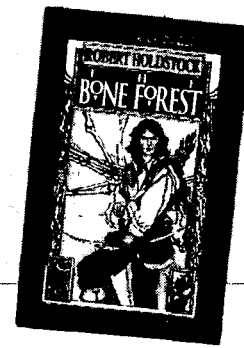

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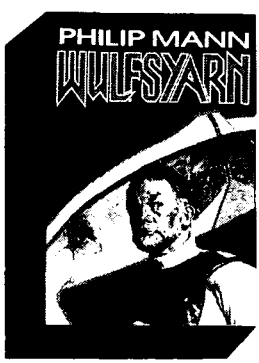

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your humorous Azazel stories (though I preferred it when you wrote off his little miracles as magic instead of bullshit science, but I'll forgive you), and other one-time stories, the best of which was "Nightfall" (in my mind anyway).

I can't begin to explain how I could have missed the extent of your talent. Blame it on a subjective youth. But now my mind is clear and I have a backlog of books to get to. Don't worry, I won't ignore your magazine in my reading, it always delights me with a wealth of good stories, many of which have been imprinted on my memory almost as life experiences.

I would like to add a very loud Boo!! to all those Norman Spinrad nay-sayers out there. I always find his articles intelligent and witty. I suppose they find Harlan Ellison hard to stomach as well, I find both writers to be similar in style and verve. I can just picture all those disgruntled readers out there saying "Woe is me, it's the same thing every month; variety!"

Sincerely,

Graham Greek
203 Chelsea Rd.
Kingston, ON
K7M-3Z1
Canada

I'm sorry, but Forward the Foundation *has been hit by my illness. I don't know when I'll be able to finish it (if ever).*

—Isaac Asimov

Dear Dr. Asimov,

I've just finished the November 1991 issue of *IAsfm*, and as usual you have a good set of stories. My

CONTEST FOR SPACE

Because of the crucial importance of space to this nation and the danger that the space program now faces in Washington, the following organizations are sponsoring a letter writing contest for adults and children: *Analog Science Fiction & Fact*, Challenger Center, *Final Frontier*, *Isaac Asimov's Science Fiction Magazine*, *NASA Tech Briefs*, National Space Society, *Omni*, Spacecause, and Spacepac.

Letters of two hundred words or less on any pro-space theme may be entered into the contest by sending a copy of the letter, your name, address, age, and phone number to Spacecause by *October 15, 1992*. Contest entries should be sent to Mark Hopkins, President, Spacecause, Dept. D, 3435 Ocean Park Blvd., Suite 201-S, Santa Monica, CA 90405.

A three-day adult session at the United States Space Camp in Huntsville, Alabama, will be awarded to the author of the best letter by someone seventeen or older. The child or young adult who writes the best letter will receive a week-long children's session. Transportation is not included. In addition, the one letter judged best overall will be published in the magazines of the sponsoring organizations listed above.

If you are interested in learning about taking effective action through letters and other means in support of the space program, send Spacecause a contribution of $10 or more.

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favorites of that issue were "Erogenoscape" and "Torso," neither of which were particularly deep or meaningful but both were smoothly written and sustained their tensions to the end. "The Fourth Intercometary" was clumsy and hard to follow, but the overall story was surprisingly enjoyable despite its faults.

It was the story "An Outpost of the Empire" and its afterword, however, that prompted me to write. I'm afraid that I have some bad news for Robert Silverberg. The scenario he bases this story on is founded on erroneous historical information. You see, according to a recent television series on the history of the Bible (whose name I cannot recall, but was shown on PBS), the Hebrew exodus from Egypt under Moses did *not* happen in actual history. The Hebrews were never enslaved by the Egyptians, and even if they were, the wilderness between Egypt and Palestine would have been too harsh for thousands of people to successfully struggle through. Even if Christianity were never to develop, common sense if nothing else indicates that some other religion would have taken its place. I find it too hard to believe that even if the Roman Empire were to survive through to the twentieth century, its old political and social structure would remain intact. Why should it resist theological, social, or technological changes over such a long time, whether homegrown or forced from the outside? Who knows what a twentieth century Roman Empire would look like, but it certainly wouldn't resemble what it was during the first century A.D. No large heterogenous society could possibly remain so stable for so long.

I like your editorials in most cases, but in "The Dismal Science" you merely made yourself look like a fool. You admit several times that you know absolutely nothing about economics, and you write a long editorial about what's wrong with the economy. That would be like a person who cannot count writing an article about higher mathematics. I expect better from you, Dr. Asimov. Save your valuable editorial space for topics that you are knowledgeable about. There are plenty of those.

Be sure to congratulate Norman Spinrad for finally writing an essay which does not contain a single profanity. Hooray! I thought he'd never manage it. Which is nice because he does deal with interesting topics.

Sincerely,

Thomas Q. Radigan
Riverside, IL

Like a fool? I don't think so. I admit I know nothing about economics, but I have my views about the subject.

—Isaac Asimov

Dear Sirs/Madam:

In the November 1991 issue of *Isaac Asimov's Science Fiction Magazine* there is an article (editorial) called "Dismal Science." I read and enjoyed the article. It expressed everything I ever wanted to say about economics but could not articulate. I am curious as to who actually wrote the article. I read the magazine all the time and

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would see it if you wrote the author of that editorial somewhere in the magazine. This is not to say that Doctor Asimov did not write it, but it appears to me as if someone wrote it who knows a great deal about economics.

Thank you for your time. Hopefully you will find reason to provide me with an answer.

Sincerely yours,

James Williams
Trenton, NJ

I wrote the article myself with my own lily-white fingers.

—Isaac Asimov

Dear Dr. Asimov:

I have been reading your books since the third grade, and have passed on my love for them to my children. Your recent novel *Prelude to Foundation* was, in my opinion, one of your best and most engaging works—demonstrating that your genius is undiminished. May you live long and prosper.

I was prompted to write this letter by some thoughts I had while reading your compilation *Robot Visions*. As a one-time computer programmer, I have been fascinated over the years by your exploration of the implications and flaws of the Three Laws of Robotics, all the way up to R. Daneel Olivaw's willingness to manipulate human history in the interest of the general interest of humanity—the "zeroth law." It seems to me that much of the threat to humanity from thinking machines which can act independently would be eliminated by a "minus first" law taking precedence over all the rest: that a robot must be truthful at all times, both about what it has observed and what it thinks and intends. I know that life, and your stories, would be far less interesting if robots were deprived of the ability to dissimulate and demur in the interest of avoiding emotional harm to human beings, but it seems to me much more likely as we program more capable computers that we will want to make them as reliable as possible in giving us information, and able to self-diagnose their own reasoning so we can correct the problem when their programming is faulty or based on incorrect information.

It also seems to me that there is a great deal of ambiguity built into the Three Laws themselves, which you have explored a number of times in your stories and novels. How does one define a "human being"? What is "injury"? The most tragic parts of human history, involving war and slavery, have been premised on limiting the definition of "human" to one's own tribe, nation, religion, or race. As an attorney, I have no doubt that a robot lawyer would be able to find loopholes in any symbolic representation of the First or Second laws.

There seems to be a recursiveness to the Three Laws. Clearly, a robot's self-preservation is just one more order given to it by human beings, which can be countermanded by a more recent order. Yet it seems to me that even the First Law is primarily an order, one that can be manipulated through instructions to a robot concerning the definitions of "human being" and "injury." In real

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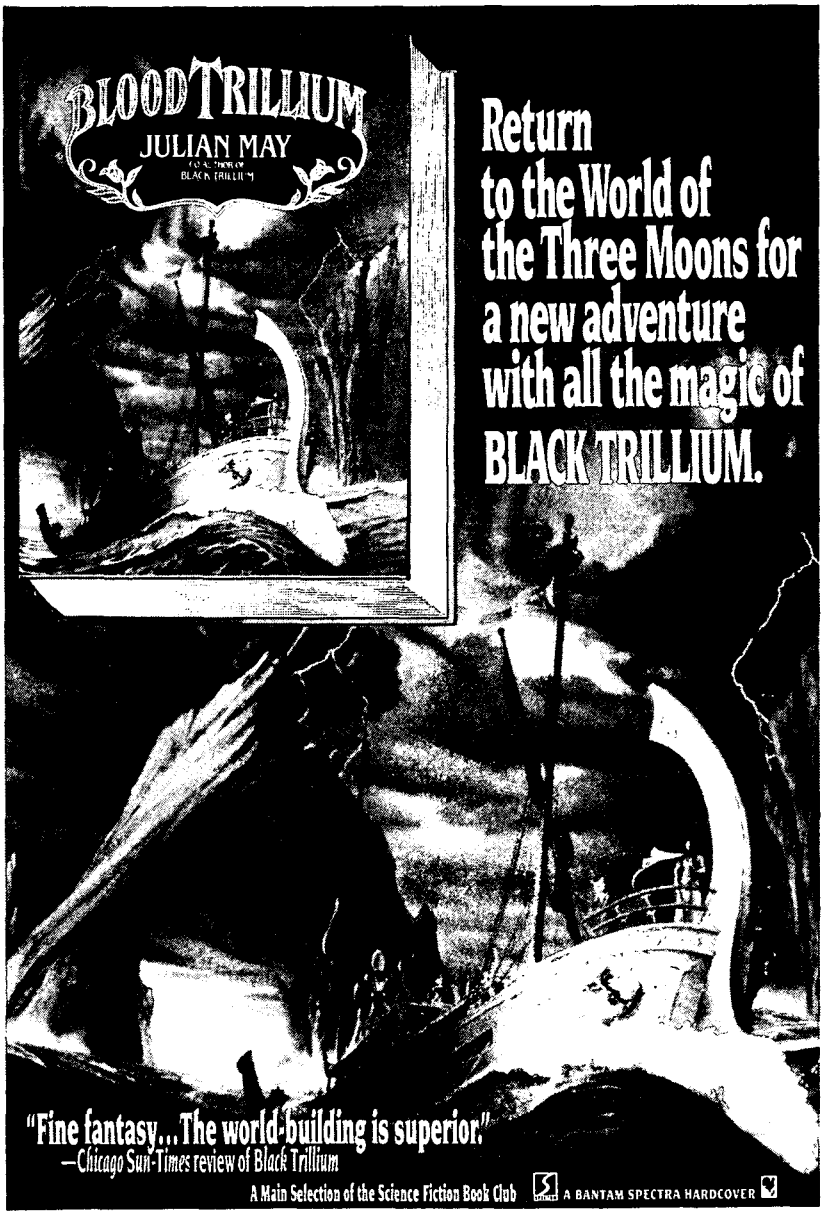
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terms, a First Law inhibition/motivation will probably be the most difficult to program into computers, since the law entails that a robot must have the ability to perceive certain objects in its environment (even at a distance) as human, insight into human motives and vulnerabilities, and the ability to understand the full consequences of its actions over distance and time. It is a level of sophistication that many adult humans fail to reach. In addition, it calls on the programmers to be wise in their judgments; for example, would a robot surgeon be able to perform an abortion if he is not instructed as to whether the fetus is to be considered "human" or not?

The First Law pushes us up against some of the most fundamental ethical questions. Is it "harm" to a human being to force her to do something that will be ultimately beneficial to herself, or to others? Any work which a robot does would "injure" the economic wellbeing of human workers who would be at least temporarily displaced. When two humans are in conflict, both acting and failing to act would result in injury to at least one of them, if not both. The robots, and your readers, are forced over and over again in your stories to make weighty judgments about the ultimate good of human beings, judgments which we humans still can't agree upon.

Because of the difficulty of even formulating the First Law in practical terms, of even getting humans to agree on what it should mean in particular circumstances, I frankly do not believe it will ever be implemented as anything more sophisticated than a collection of specific inhibitions or motivations limited to explicit physical injury.

An even more fundamental reason I doubt that the First Law would be adopted is that many of the potential uses of robots would be eliminated by it. Probably the most sophisticated independently acting computers today are those on Cruise missiles; yet their primary function is to injure humans and destroy themselves in the process. At a less extreme level, robots or computers used for security services and ultimately for police work (Robocop?) will need to be able to injure some humans in order to protect the innocent and society.

In less sophisticated tasks, the risk of injury to humans may be inherent in carrying out a task, such as driving a car or handling dangerous chemicals; no programming safeguards will be able to guarantee that such robots will never harm human beings, and the public would be right to be skeptical of claims to the contrary. While a robot might become intelligent enough to avoid intentional injury, I doubt that it could always avoid those oversights or mistakes which constitute negligence under the law of torts. Since product liability is usually a matter of strict liability, it even seems doubtful that a robot who commits humanlike errors would be compared to a "reasonable man;" it would instead be held to that higher standard of accountability, to the dismay of its owner and manufacturer. Thus, even a fully implemented First Law would be no guarantee of safety in robot activities, and

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would only increase some of the legal risks to the manufacturer, since the First Law would prevent the maker from arguing either that the buyer of the robot assumed the risk of injury or that the injured party was contributorily negligent in relying on the robot to protect her.

The Second Law itself is phrased too broadly. No one would seriously want a robot to be subject to misdirection by any bystander or, even worse, a malicious "hacker" seeking to sabotage its activities. We want computers to be programmable, but only by their owners. Most of computer security today is taken up by finding ways of ensuring that the Second Law does not apply except in a very limited sense.

To summarize: While I love your robot stories, I think the probability of the Three Laws actually being implemented is low. The Third Law is just a corollary of the Second Law, which will often be countermanded in order to fulfill the robot's mission. The Second Law is too broad and would actually make a robot less reliable. The First Law is so difficult for anyone (other than a genius such as you) to implement, that I do not foresee it ever being achieved to the universal satisfaction of the public, since it reaches ultimate issues of ethics which are bound to culture and religion. Together they lack the "minus first" law that any computer should reliably communicate the facts as it knows them, especially the facts concerning its own knowledge and thoughts.

In fact, I don't think the Three Laws are really about computers that can manipulate their environments. Rather, I think they are about creating ethical people, people who put the welfare of others ahead of their own interests. Your robot stories are not about our devices, so much as they are about ourselves.

Thank you, Dr. Asimov,

Raymond Takashi Swenson
Lt Colonel, USAF
J.D., LL.M. Environmental Law
Novato, CA

I agree with you on the Three Laws, but I get many stories out of them.

—Isaac Asimov

This is our last letters column with answers by Isaac Asimov. The letters column will continue, and the answers, where they seem necessary, will be written by myself or by Gardner Dozois.

For our typesetter's sake, letters meant for publication should be neatly typed and double-spaced on one side of a sheet of paper, only. Please be sure to include your entire address. Most letters will be published with the author's city and state, only. We will publish your full address if the address appears under your signature or if you tell us to do so. Correspondence for this column should be sent to: Letters Column, Isaac Asimov's Science Fiction Magazine, *380 Lexington Avenue, New York, NY 10168-0035.*

—Sheila Williams

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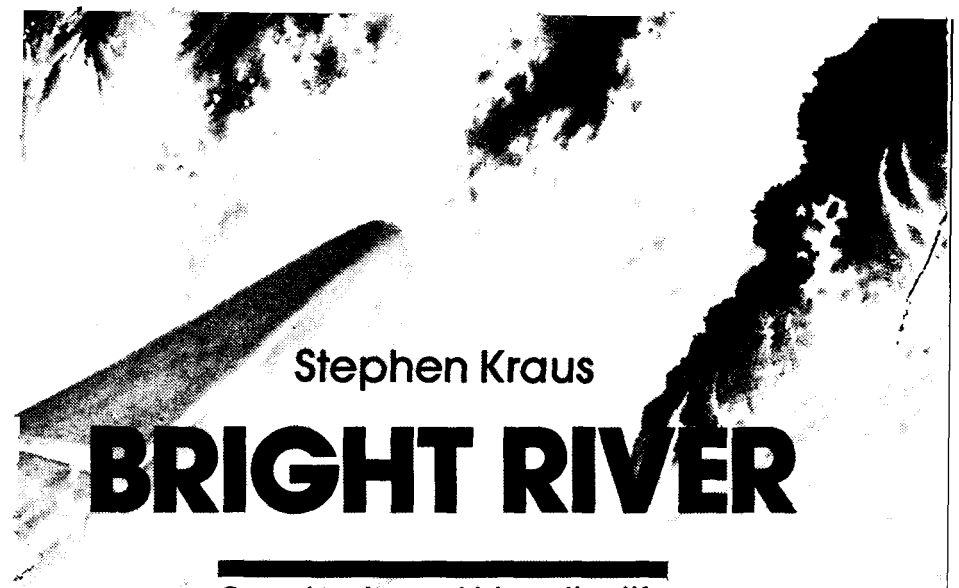

Stephen Kraus

BRIGHT RIVER

Greg had spent his entire life seeking the ultimate thrill. And kayaking a lava flow on Epsilon Eridani VI just might provide it. . . .

art: Bob Walters

"A first descent," Greg said. The uplink connection sliced off the beginnings of his words, turning his voice percussive and edgy. "The main vent is erupting now—huge plumes, flows a hundred kilometers long. No one has ever kayaked on lava before."

Insane, I thought, like all of Greg's projects.

"We're leaving in three months, when the boats are done. I found a guy who can fabricate them out of titanium and carbon composite. We'll have to use spent uranium for ballast—they won't displace enough lava to maneuver otherwise." The uplink crackled for a moment. "Want to come along?"

I laughed nervously. "Me? I'm teaching two courses this term—"

"We'll only be gone for a few days. Get someone to fill in for you. You need this, little brother. Your life's tedious."

I could hear my heartbeat. He was serious. "Look, Greg, I've never even been kayaking before . . . "

He laughed his flat, dismissive laugh. "Neither have I, little brother. Neither have I. We'll go up to the Rogue River for a few days first, learn the moves."

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I searched desperately for another objection. "How much is this going to cost, Greg?"

He hesitated. "Nothing, really. It's mostly sponsored. Your share comes to 20K in hard currency. We'll get that back when we sell the holo rights."

I wiped my forehead. "Greg, I can't do this."

"Why not?" There was a hard edge to his voice. "This one's wired, little brother. The rest of the crew's together. Eridani is lined up perfectly for the jump."

Why not? Because I was a physical chemist, not a daredevil like Greg. I was content with my life—it had challenges and uncertainty enough. I couldn't afford the 20K. A long list of reasons.

Still . . . I'd heard Greg's stories at innumerable family gatherings—about the only time I saw him now—amid powdered aunts and rapt children. Ballooning in the Jovian atmosphere, skiing on Olympus Mons, gliding over acid-etched canyons on Cern. In recent years, when I thought of my brother, I always saw the same picture: Greg sitting crosslegged in the living room of our parents' ranch, circled by kids, pushing back his straight blond hair, wrapping his hands around a mug of beer and talking. . . .

I was in the middle of half a dozen projects, terribly busy. I had students who relied on me. I was too old. A long list of reasons.

But not nearly long enough.

•

The four of them, Greg and three of his traveling companions, filled the tiny, sparsely furnished apartment. Greg smiled his tense smile and introduced me around. I had a hard time keeping his friends straight: Gordon (Greg called him Gordo), a surly character named Jesse, and somebody else with a prominent nose Greg introduced as Beak. They were all huge and loud and swaggering, and quite a bit younger than Greg.

I don't think I impressed them much.

Greg read off items from a pile of scribbled lists: powered environment suits with blackout helmets, woven carbon fabric spray skirts, titanium paddles (feathered), a bubble-wheeled carry-all (six seat option, with luggage rack), a podship charter. Greg appointed me expedition clerk; I struggled to organize all of it.

It wasn't until half an hour later that I noticed a young woman reading in the bedroom. After a minute she looked calmly back at me. She was slender and deeply black, and her hair was woven with silver threads.

Greg went for beer at some point, and I took the opportunity to study his trophy shelf. Mostly there were holo cubes of him with his friends, their arms draped over each other's shoulders. They grinned out at me

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in groups of eight or ten or a dozen from the decks of trimarans, from beside glaciers, from atop piles of brightly colored parasails. The scenery and clothing varied, but their expressions never changed: eyes that looked steadily at the camera, shoulders square, noses sunburnt. I'd be in the next cube, presumably (at one end, since I was easily the shortest of the company). How genuine would my grin look?

I felt someone standing next to me. I turned around and found myself facing the thin black woman. We watched each other curiously for a moment. Her cheekbones were so high they nearly hid her eyes.

"You don't look like him," she said.

She wore a loose, crinkly wrap striped in saturated colors. Very chic.

"You're not much like him at all."

She meant Greg, of course. "No," I said, "I suppose not."

She laughed suddenly and startlingly—the sound was more resonant than her slim body should have been able to manage. It spoke of too many experiences, too much knowledge of life.

"I'm Chi. Greg never would have gotten around to introducing us."

"I'm Greg's brother," I said. There, anyway, it was the only identity I had.

"I know. He talks about you all the time."

"He does?" I couldn't imagine Greg doing that. And I felt all the more embarrassed for Chi. Greg had never mentioned her to me.

"Are you going on the trip?"

She laughed again and shook her head. "Those are Greg's demons, not mine."

I nodded warily. I was underestimating her. "How long have you known him?"

"My uncle sponsored his last trip—the tower colony traverse, or something like that."

"Connolly Towers," I said, automatically.

She smiled indulgently. "Yes. But my uncle wouldn't touch this kayaking thing. Volcanos spook him."

A chill went through me. "Is that why he invited me?" I said, half to myself. "Because he needed the money?"

Chi looked away, serious now. "No, I don't think so. He did need money, but that's only part of it."

"What then?"

She twisted some of the silver braids in her hair, puzzling it out. "I think he wants confirmation."

"Confirmation? Of what?"

"Of who he is, you know? Greg works hard at that, defining himself."

I shook my head. "Too deep for me."

Her laughter bubbled up again, filling the room.

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Greg came back from the kitchen then, drawn by the sound, perhaps. He took me aside. "Have you told Dad?"

Chi stepped away discreetly at Greg's mention of our father.

"About the trip?" I asked. "No, why?"

He spoke very quietly, glancing around to see if anyone else was listening. "I think you should tell him. He's not going to like it."

I shrugged. "It's our decision."

"He's not going to see it that way."

"You talk to him then."

Greg shook his head, clearly agitated. "No, you do it. He'll listen to you." Before I could reply he turned away and summoned the others.

We worked into the morning. Greg's energy was inexhaustible. Near dawn I collapsed on a futon. The last thing I saw was Chi's smile as I closed my eyes.

By the time I was through, my expedition checklist had 1138 items on it. The list was a sort of fractal entity—its complexity remained constant regardless of the level of detail I chose to examine. Gradually, it swallowed the rest of my life.

Our problems were endless. The custom boats cost twice as much as originally quoted (they needed an ablative coating to cut down on friction, and Jesse kept demanding more safety features, over Greg's objections). Materials were unavailable. The standard fittings lost their temper at the temperatures we'd be experiencing. We needed a bond ten times my annual salary before we could charter a ship.

I neglected my laboratory work. I spent hours on the uplink alternately threatening and pleading with contractors and suppliers and agents. Our budget dwindled. The delays infuriated Greg. He had no patience for details.

Finally, six of us—Greg, his three friends, Chi, and I—flew up to Oregon for our trial run on the Rogue.

The area around the river was pure twentieth century backwater. The houses were wood frame and collapsing, intentionally shabby, it seemed to me. Their inhabitants were fiercely isolationist.

Greg drove our van in manual through overhanging spruce and fir. Forty years before, the area had been clear cut—some tree stumps survived as mossy bumps. But the region's economics had changed since then. Dark walls of forest pressed in on us as we rattled over the narrow road.

Chi and I sat in the back of the van. Her eyes were closed, and she hummed some ancient, rhythmic music. I asked about her songs, and she told me first about the village in Nigeria where she'd learned them and

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then about the seven younger brothers and sisters she'd raised after her mother had died there.

"Did any of that prepare you for Greg?" I asked, regretting its triviality as soon as I said it.

She shook her head and laughed—I always seemed able to amuse her without really meaning to—then she recounted the unlikely chain of events that brought her from West Africa to California. I listened incredulously, disturbed both by her account and by the monotone my life sounded beside hers.

"Greg must have loved that story," I said. It was a real adventure, not one of the synthetic ones he was used to.

She smiled again at my innocence. "I haven't told him."

"Why not?"

"He's never asked."

When I couldn't find an answer, she went back to her singing.

We arrived at our camp site an hour later, deep in the green darkness by the river. We paired off, Greg with Chi, Gordon with Beak. I shared a tent with Jesse, and the rushing sound of the water mixed with his snores and stretched my time sense until an hour seemed to pass between each grating breath.

Kayaking was a mystery first, then a physics problem: leverage and trajectory, dynamic balance, local chaos and global stasis. The symmetry of the flatwater strokes appealed to me, my shoulders swinging in rhythm with my heartbeat, the boat hissing forward. And, to my surprise, I felt in control in the rapids. I could always anticipate the pull of the current and the shear of the eddies. I was a conservative boater even so, scouting the big drops and the blind turns, planning my path stroke for stroke, finding the safe channels. It was different for Greg, of course. The river came naturally to him. He was intuitive in the rapids. He'd throw his paddle up in the air at the top of a class IV drop and float through on instinct and nerves. Gordon was an experienced kayaker—he taught us the basics. But after the fourth day Greg took the lead and Gordon and the rest of us scrambled to keep up.

The stretch of the river where we practiced was accessible by road, and we were constantly dodging rafts and roaring jet boats filled with tourists. For the last two days we decided to float downriver, away from the noise and the casual adventurers. We had the skills down by then. The trip was mostly for fun.

I loved the isolation of the river, the whiteness of the rapids to the eye and the ear, the concentration that shut out everything except foam and eddies and rocks.

Greg grew impatient after the first morning. He paddled way out ahead

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of us and beat viciously at the surface of the water with his paddle blades whenever we dropped into an eddy to rest.

That afternoon we came to the one big waterfall on the run—a five meter drop between pillars of granite. Class VI. Experts only. We beached our boats and dodged across the rocks to have a look at it from below. Greg stood very still amid the spray and the dense roar of the descending river.

"Wait down here with the throw ropes," he told us.

"Don't be stupid," Jesse said. "You can't run this."

"Just do it, okay?"

Gordon and Beak went back to their boats obediently for the rescue gear. I followed Greg back up the path and watched him climb awkwardly into his boat. His hands shook, and he had to try several times before he got his spray skirt attached to his cockpit lip. After that he sat motionless for a minute with his head tilted back and his eyes closed.

"You don't have to do this," I said from the shore.

Greg turned slowly to look at me. "The hell I don't."

His paddle bit into the river. Two quick strokes took him out of the eddy and straight to the edge of the falls. He seemed to hang there, motionless for a moment, leaning forward.

An eagle circled overhead. The wind rippled the foliage on the opposite shore.

And Greg slid down the falls on a sparkling cloud of foam, untouched, landing upright and exultant in the pool at the bottom.

When the shouts died down, Jesse and Beak portaged their boats. I scouted from below until I found a sneak route where a channel split off ahead of the main drop. I paddled it without much trouble.

Down at the bottom I counted heads.

"Where's Gordon?" I asked.

Somebody pointed. I looked up and saw him approaching the falls. He seemed paralyzed, his paddle out of the water, the nose of his boat drifting off course. He tumbled over the lip, already upside-down before hitting the pool. He vanished in the turbulence at the bottom.

Greg shot out of his eddy and reached Gordon's boat within a few seconds. He attached a carabiner to the stern tie-down and dragged Gordon back, half-conscious. We crowded in a semi-circle and inhaled in unison as Greg pushed a liter of Rogue River out of Gordon's lungs. When Gordon was coughing on his own, Greg stood up and shoved his fists into the pockets of his cut-off shorts.

"Pretty lame effort," he said.

Gordon's eyes rolled up and he passed out.

* * *

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The last afternoon we paddled down a wide place in the river with decayed resorts perched high up on the banks on either side. The jet boats were back, blasting the leafy peace of the river with their chainsaw whines.

After a hundred lazy turns and fern-draped side canyons, I finally saw our take-out point just ahead on the right bank. I picked out our van and Chi's slim silhouette on the shore, waiting for us.

With fifty meters to go, a jet boat swung around a bend heading upstream, straight toward us. I heard Greg curse from behind me. The rest of us moved to the side of the river, out of its path. Greg pointed his nose directly at the jet boat and dug in.

The sun shone fiercely on the upstream curl of the riffles. I had to squint. Greg leaned forward. His blond hair stuck out in wet clumps from beneath his helmet. His brown arms swung like blades.

Jesse shouted something inaudible above the washboarding rush of the boat.

The distance between them closed. Greg became a black waterbug silhouette, his paddle blades blurring. The jet boat skipper must have seen him then—I heard a hesitation in the engine throttle—but he plowed ahead, not wanting to lose momentum.

They were a few boat lengths apart. I gripped my cockpit coaming hard enough to lose feeling in both my hands. Greg's paddle blades cut mechanically into the bright water. The jet boat swerved hard to the left, and its engine sputtered to a stop.

Leaves rustled, water lapped against rocks.

The boat drifted into a granite outcropping. I heard the crunch of shattering plastic and the angry shouts of tourists.

Jesse grunted beside me. "He's going to get us all killed."

Greg performed an eskimo roll as a salute, then swung his boat around and headed toward the take out.

Most of the trip to our parents' house was radar controlled, so there was nothing for Greg and me to do except argue.

"What did Mom say when you told her?" Greg asked. He had his feet up on the dashboard of my runabout and was drinking beer out of a squeezebox. There were four empty boxes on the floor already.

Chi had decided not to come. She always found a reason to miss our family gatherings. When I asked why, she told me that they made Greg irritable. She didn't want to be around him.

"Mom didn't really say anything," I told him.

"But she ran off to tell Dad."

"I imagine so."

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SEPTEMBER

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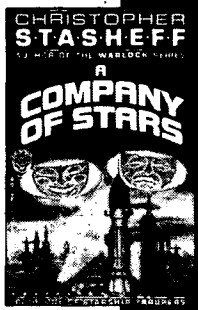
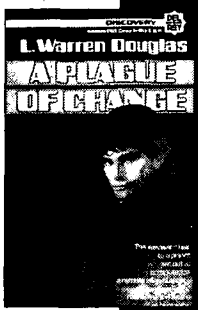
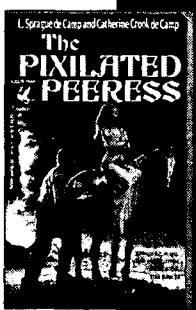


In this month's Del Rey Discovery, a lone human becomes involved with a strange alien race—and alters the destiny of mankind!



Encountering a naked countess was the start of Thorolf's troubles. The adventure she put *him through* was sure to be the end...of him!



ASTRAL ACTORS, CURIOUS CREATURES, AND A DISTRESSING DAMSEL— FROM THE FIRST NAME IN IMAGINATION...

DEL REY

#1 in Science Fiction and Fantasy

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"You *know* it."

I shrugged. "There's not much she could have said. We're adults. We can do what we want."

Greg pitched his beerbox out of the window. "I'll bet you haven't tried that one out on Dad."

He was right. I hadn't.

I changed the subject. "Any idea what happened to Jesse? He was supposed to meet me at the welding shop this morning."

My brother didn't answer for a minute.

"Greg?"

He turned away and looked out the window. "He pulled out."

"What do you mean?"

"I mean Jesse pulled out. He went back to Texas or wherever the hell he lives."

"Three days before the jump? I just transferred 3K to cover the new bracing for his boat." A hundred things ran through my head. None of them fit together. "That only leaves three of us on the river with one to drive shuttle and run the holo cameras. That's an awfully small group if someone gets in trouble."

Greg slammed his fist on the dashboard. "No one's going to get in trouble!"

We rode on sullenly for another half hour until the grid dropped us off below our parents' hill. I switched into manual and drove up the long gravel driveway to the ranch. We were late. I heard loud voices coming from inside the big stucco house fifty meters before we reached it.

Greg spent a minute composing himself at the door. When he walked in, he was animated and grinning boyishly.

We sat at the head of the table at dinner, the guests of honor, unofficially. My father sat at the opposite end. He looked the same as always, his shirt sealed all the way up to his chin, his hair pulled taut over his bald spot. He spent the evening looking stonily at his plate. My mother sat beside him, but she found a dozen reasons to visit our end of the table. Her manner was hesitant with both of us. She asked me about my work (in hopeless disarray just now), girlfriends (none recently), apartment (neglected)—everything except the trip.

Afterward the kids gathered around Greg as usual. I went into the kitchen to help with the dishes. Two of my aunts stopped talking the moment I walked in, and they found reasons to leave a minute later. I'd disturbed the harmony of our gathering, somehow.

I wondered: Is this what Greg sees every time he looks at us?

I drifted up the stairs to avoid having to talk to anyone else. The corridor was dark. The only light came from one slightly open door-

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way—the bathroom, in fact. Voices came from inside. I recognized my father's harsh basso and Greg's tenor.

". . . didn't have to get your brother involved."

That was my father.

"He could have said no."

I stayed back, out of sight.

"He never could. Not to you."

"He can handle this. He's good."

I heard my father's hard shoes ring on the floor tiles. He must have been moving closer to Greg.

"That's not the point. You two are all your mother has. You can see what all this nonsense is doing to her."

That one must have hurt. I heard Greg shuffle. I imagined two boxers circling each other.

My father pressed his advantage. "When are you going to grow up, Greg? You're thirty-four years old—"

"Thirty-seven, dad."

"You've never had a job. How much longer do you expect to live like this?"

"As long as I have to." His footsteps grew suddenly louder. "They're waiting for me downstairs." He shoved the door open and strode out into the hallway.

I slid back into the shadows and waited for my father to leave before I went back down.

I was juggling lemons for one of my cousins an hour later when Greg whispered in my ear: "Let's go."

He was still smiling, but I could see the tension a millimeter below the surface.

"It's only ten o'clock."

"*Now.*"

I shrugged and followed him out through a gauntlet of upturned cheeks and nervous wishes for a safe trip.

"You can't stay?" Mom asked wistfully.

Greg shook his head. "We're flying to Quito in two days."

She seemed afraid to touch him.

Greg had inherited his lanky build and his ageless smile from our mother. Tonight I was startled at how old and bowed she looked when she stood next to him.

Once we were outside on the gravel path, Greg's composure disintegrated. He slammed a fist into the big live oak at the bottom of the path. The crickets stopped their slow chirping for a moment, then resumed.

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"What's bothering you, Greg?"

"Did Dad catch up with you?"

"Not really. We said hello."

Greg still had both hands curled into fists. "He cornered me in the bathroom while I was taking a leak. Just try arguing with someone while you're holding your dick in your hand."

He started to walk again, facing away from me. "Nothing I do is ever good enough for him."

I didn't answer. The night was cooling quickly. I shivered in my poly shirt. Greg stopped in front of my runabout and gave its plastic fender a savage kick. The crickets quieted again.

He took a deep breath. "Let's get out of here."

Greg sat rigidly on the front seat as we rolled down the driveway. I looked over at him.

"Greg, what *are* you going to do when you're forty?"

I felt the heat gather in him. He jerked around as if he were going to hit me. Then he slumped into his seat.

"I wasn't planning to make it that far."

I nodded and locked us into the grid. We didn't speak again until I dropped him off at his apartment an hour later.

We spent most of the last afternoon crammed into a booth in the airport bar. I kept jumping up to make uplink calls to my lab, trying to handle last minute problems.

Chi wore bracelets and a spray sweater. Her hips, squeezed between Greg's and mine, took up almost no space. Beak and Gordon sat across from us, indistinguishable in the gloom of the lounge. They put their heads together when they talked, so I wouldn't hear. Greg sat quietly, knocking down tequilas one after the other, staring straight down into his glass.

"I hate this part," he said every few minutes.

For once, I understood him perfectly.

The flight announcement was made, and Greg signaled for the tab. When it came, he handed it to me.

"Put it on the expedition card," he said.

I stiffened. "Not a chance. There's only a couple of thousand left on it. I'm saving that for emergencies." Expedition financing was still a sore point with me.

For just a moment Greg looked at me as he might an insect that was annoying him.

"This *is* an emergency."

Chi squeezed my hand. "Not now," she whispered.

I stared back at Greg for a moment, then shrugged and thumbed the

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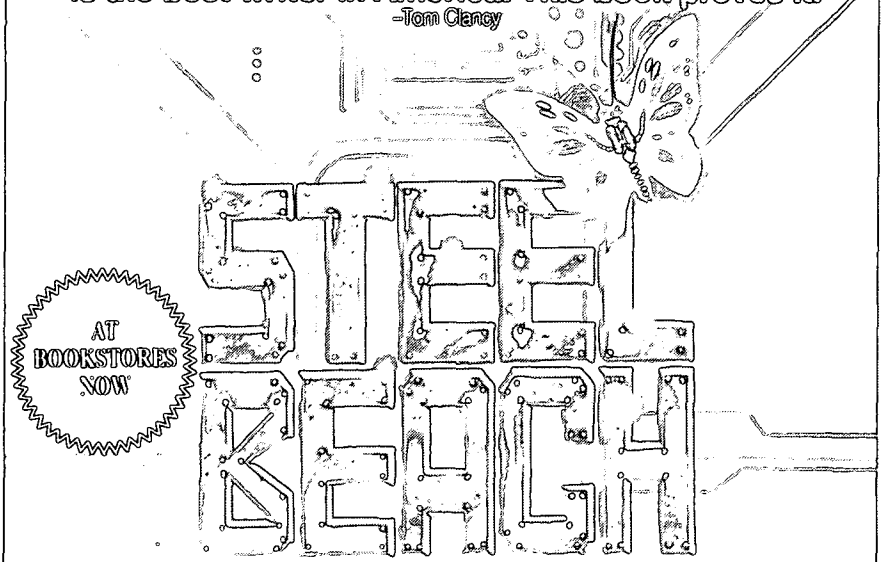

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expedition card across the check. Our credit line dropped to 1926.53 in hard currency.

I tried to look the other way while Chi and Greg said goodbye. She didn't want to let go. Greg detached himself impatiently and slung his flight bag over his shoulder.

Chi took my arm at the gate. "Take care of him," she said. "Okay?"

The pleading in her eyes disturbed me. And I was still angry at Greg.

"Why do you stay with him?" I asked. "The way he treats you—"

She held my arm tighter. "Don't. Please. I have to stay. Can't you see that? Everything else is falling apart for him."

"What do you mean?"

She watched Greg walk toward the ramp. His stride seemed uncharacteristically stiff and uncertain.

"There were twelve skiers on Olympus Mons—I looked at the picture on his shelf. And nine climbers on those stupid towers. He can't even keep a team of five together now. Most of his regular sponsors have pulled out, too—he doesn't have the right image for them any more."

She let go of my arm. All of her strength had left her. "I don't think there'll be any more expeditions. I think this is his last one." She almost whispered: "So I can't leave him, okay?"

I nodded, numbly.

"Take care of him?" she repeated.

I nodded again, wondering just how I could keep a promise like that.

The podship challenged my sense of scale. It kept growing as we slid along the EVA cable. The ship was blunt and squat with an impact-absorbing plastic skirt at one end. Tapered cargo pods bloomed around its middle, tilted outwards like flower petals. The ship was too featureless, it seemed to me, to be as big as it was.

We spaced ourselves out unevenly along the cable to damp out standing waves, but long, thrumming sinusoids still snapped along its length. I was last in line. The three backs in front of me all said "TVI Technologies" in bright green letters—one of our sponsors.

Here and there, the nightside Earth glowed a vague yellow below me. The station and the ship tethered to it seemed impossibly hard-edged by contrast. This was new to me. I'd been on passenger vessels that actually docked with the stalkstations. Charters were less formal, evidently.

I spent a minute worrying about our gear. Like us, it had flown to Quito, rode up the stalk, and had been packed into the pods. That is, if some of it wasn't still on a loading bay in San Diego or in orbit around Procyon IV . . .

The sun rose around the curve of the Earth and caught the station in a brilliant halo. My faceplate darkened while the terminator raced down

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the latticework of the stalk toward the Earth's surface. The enormous strangeness of it pressed in on me. I'd be waking up about now on a normal morning, making toast, riding my bike to my lab. Instead, I was thirty thousand kilometers above the equator, clipped to a heaving EVA cable.

I still wasn't sure why.

Greg reached the landing skirt, and I could finally grasp the ship's size—perhaps twenty meters in length and a third that in diameter. Greg opened the airlock, pitched his bag through, and climbed in. Gordon was next, then Beak and myself. Following Greg, as always.

The ship's interior was cramped and vanlike: six plastic seats with five-point harnesses, a control panel and windows up front, warning icons in bright red. No frills.

I was asleep when we dropped out of orbit. We'd spent two days matching velocities with Epsilon Eridani VI following the jump from Earth orbit. That small difference in velocities made the Eridani system one of the cheapest of extrasolar destinations. Unfortunately, none of its planets was habitable. Epsilon Eridani VI was as close as any of them came—it had an atmosphere, anyway, albeit one of steam and sulphur and ash. At six AU from its primary, it was farther out than Jupiter. And it was incredibly volcanic. I counted a dozen erupting cones as we skimmed over the planet's surface: leaping jets of fire that froze into grotesque black formations as they settled. Closer in, I could see smoldering lava lakes and walls of flame rising from jagged fissures; a tortured landscape of scarlet and black.

Tourists loved it.

Greg flew the stubby ship, diving recklessly low as we topped a broad rise that ended in an enormous lava lake. We circled it once, then settled down on a flat outcropping a kilometer below the lake rim. The absence of the ship's fusion roar left a ringing silence in my head.

We donned our bulky environment suits and checked out helmet-to-helmet intercoms. They sounded faint and scratchy even a few meters apart. We'd saved some money there.

Finally, one by one, we cycled out of the ship and stepped onto the surface of Epsilon Eridani VI. It was night, but that wasn't of much consequence so far from the primary. Particulates scattered the orange light so that a dull glow seemed to emanate from everywhere. The ground rumbled continuously beneath our feet.

I stood on a pocked slab of basalt. My limbs felt unresponsive; my stomach felt hollow. The mundane tasks helped a little. We opened the pods and unloaded our bubble-tired carryall and our boats. I felt almost comically awkward at first until I got the hang of the power assists in

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my suit. I crushed the first box I picked up, and, instead of pitching a coil of wire to Beak, I nearly sent it into orbit.

The tension ate at everyone, especially Greg. He snapped at all of us and alternated periods of brutal activity with long minutes spent staring at the fiery glow on the horizon.

I ran through the equipment list on my helmet monitor. "Did anyone find the patches and rivets?"

"Yeah," Gordon said. "They were in the bag with the tie-downs."

"How about the lights?"

"We're not going to need lights," Greg said. "It's bright enough. Come on, let's get going."

"Just a couple of more things—"

"Let's *go*, for Christ's sake."

I wondered how Greg had managed to stay attached to those rock faces on the Connolly Towers if he didn't have the patience to check out his equipment first.

He swung into the carryall and started it up. The others hustled in after him. I went through our gear, item by item, one more time, before I followed them.

Furious, Greg wound the turbine up to full whine and tore out across a plain that was as wrinkled as an elephant. As we approached the lava lake, the wrinkles turned into folds, then ridges, then crevasses. Steam rose from cracks and turned the rock slick and shiny. I watched Greg's manic driving technique more carefully than the nightmare terrain. I assumed, when the time came, I'd be doing most of the shuttle driving.

After an hour spent circling the fissures and the tilted slabs, we reached the base of a steep circular ridge. Greg, calmer now, stopped the carryall and pointed to me. He and I got out and climbed.

He waved to me from the top of the ridge. "Check this out, little brother."

I finished the climb and looked down, holding very tightly to a jagged tooth of basalt at the lip. A pool of molten rock at least a kilometer across simmered a few meters below us. Its surface was crusted over, but brilliant fresh lava showed through a shifting web of cracks.

The crater lip formed a perfect circle. At the far side I could just make out a large gap in the ridge where lava poured through in a smooth stream.

"We've come to the right place," Greg said. He pointed to the gap. "There's where our flow starts."

I switched to a private circuit. "Greg, it's hard to imagine this being the right place for anything. What the hell are we doing here?"

A bubble of lava rose from the depths of the planet. It stretched the lake's surface upward for a moment, then burst, sending out concentric

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waves. Greg didn't answer. The waves reached the crater rim and splashed up toward us. I recoiled.

Greg laughed a metallic laugh. I could just make out his fierce, knotted features through his faceplate.

"You're in my territory now, little brother." His voice was hard as stone. "None of your college degrees count for shit here. Remember that."

Another bubble rose in the lake below us, paused, and burst.

We were an hour working our way around the crater to the source of the flow. The slope was gentle just beyond the gap, and the flow meandered, thick and slow, almost coiling back on itself like a reptile. Surface tension kept the lava humped up two meters or more above the older, solid rock. Farther down, the flow picked up speed as the gradient steepened, finally rolling into a deep fissure in a valley far below us, nearly obscured by rising steam.

Greg studied the river, then looked at the three of us as we climbed out of the carryall, his eyes finally settling on Gordon.

"Gordo, you drive shuttle this section," he said.

A black space opened up in my stomach. My limbs felt numb.

"What the hell, Greg?" Gordon asked.

"This is just the shakedown run. We'll go two klicks or so to that first big bend there." He pointed downslope. "See how the boats are holding together."

Gordon's mouth was still open.

"It's okay," I said quickly, "I'll drive."

Greg glared for a moment, shook his head. I looked down at the black ledge. This wasn't the time to be challenging Greg's authority.

We unloaded the boats very deliberately. A scream came from overhead just as we were finishing—a tourist ship flying low over the caldera. Greg shook his fist at its fusion tail.

"Gawk someplace else," he said. "This one's *ours*."

Our gear was piled on a ledge a few centimeters above the surface of the flow. For a moment, we stood in an awkward semicircle around it. I looked at my boat. Its lines fell just short of beauty or elegance—they were a little too blunt and pragmatic. Just now I found that reassuring.

I checked over my equipment, secured the uranium ballast along my boat's shallow keel. I snapped together the twin-bladed paddle, stepped into my woven carbon fiber spray skirt, sealed it around my waist. I concentrated on each individual task, forcing myself to ignore the lizard crawl of the lava and the sun-colored cracks in the surface of the flow.

The others climbed quietly into their boats, and I followed, my knees flexed slightly beneath the front deck, my hips wedged between the

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braces. I attached the spray skirt to the elliptical cockpit coaming.

An earthquake rocked us for a few seconds. I hardly noticed.

"Let's do it," Greg said. His tinny voice sounded calm and businesslike.

We wriggled forward, using our hands to slide the smooth hulls along the ledge. Greg slid into the flow first, followed by Beak. Their boats bobbed awkwardly and bumped into each other.

"Follow me," Greg said. "Catch every eddy I do."

One more push and I was in. The flow tugged at me gently. The lava sloshed in leisurely ripples. The black crust broke apart where my paddle struck it, and blindingly bright orange froth pushed up from underneath.

The boat was *heavy*.

I took a few experimental forward strokes. My suit motors shrieked at the resistance. It wasn't much like kayaking, really. What was needed here was power, not finesse.

Greg was already ten meters ahead. I dug in, trying to catch up. I was learning with every stroke. The first thing I noticed was how many different kinds of lava there were. The crusty kind broke apart with a crunch as my boat cut through it. Sticky lava was annoying—it built up on my paddle and hull until I stopped to shake it loose. And lava could be runny or thick, smooth or deeply textured. Boating through each was a different problem.

Gradually, I closed the gap with the others. But my arms ached and my boat refused to track. Each stroke threw me unpredictably off course.

Then we hit the first rapid. It was a simple half-meter drop without any obstructions. A broad V-shaped tongue of lava marked the best route, ending in a short set of standing waves. Bright peaks stuck up above black froth tumbling in the troughs.

Breathing hard, I got myself lined up with the smooth lava tongue and slid down cleanly. At the bottom, my boat plowed straight into the first wave. The force of the flow hit me like a wall. I pitched upward and *stopped*. I was turned sideways in an instant, and I had to dig my paddle into the flank of the wave to avoid flipping over.

The wave carried me up. I balanced for a second on its crest, still sideways, then rode down into the trough. I batted away thick froth and rode up the next wave. From the top I could see Greg and Beak floating in an eddy on river right. I took a few quick lateral strokes and swung in to join them.

"You okay?" Greg asked.

I tongued off my intercom and took several ragged breaths before turning it on again. "Nothing to it," I said.

He nodded. "Check your boats for thermal stress."

I looked at my temperature gauge, scanned my hull and spray skirt. No problems.

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I began to feel a little more confident. Paddling through lava was work, even with the power assists, but a strategically positioned blade provided a lot of leverage.

Greg peeled out of the eddy, and I wobbled out after him, second in line. The current picked me up like a giant hand as I crossed the eddy line, propelling me downstream.

The flow had accelerated. Either the river was rising or the gradient of its bed was increasing. We were in a smooth section, perhaps thirty meters wide with pointed rocks lining both banks. The lava's viscosity was too great for riffles to form as they would have in water, but the crust on the surface wrinkled like an old man's eyes where the flow was the fastest.

"Gordo, are you still with us?" I heard Greg ask.

"Yeah, lots of quakes here."

"Okay. Keep us in sight."

The crust started to break up on either side of my hull, and ellipsoidal waves of bright, pure lava rose and subsided as my passage disturbed the equilibrium of the surface. Ahead, I could see a horizon line where the river seemed to end. A muffled roar grew louder as we approached—more rapids.

"There's a slot on the far left," Greg said, shouting above the thudding of the lava.

I waited while Greg lined himself up. He nosed over the horizon line and vanished.

The radio was silent for ten seconds, then fifteen. I backpaddled, holding my position. Then I heard Greg trying to catch his breath.

"That was a tricky one. Catch the eddy on river left."

I let the stream take me for a while, then pulled to the left, trying to find the slot Greg had used. I could see the rapid now, a turbulent drop between twisted rocks.

To my right, the smooth, ellipsoidal waves I'd noticed earlier rose and fell, moving slightly faster than the flow; three of them, almost in formation. At the drop they detached from the flow and became three identical otter-shapes for a moment before vanishing into the turbulence.

What the hell was that? I wondered.

Then I was in the rapid. I realized at once that I was too far to the left. My starboard gunwale dipped. I held my paddle shoulder high and buried its right blade into the lava in a high brace for support.

The river churned, stunningly bright, and curled back on itself in a froth of cooling red-black rock that splattered against my suit and faceplate.

I landed upright, but spun around backward, facing upstream. I floated

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helplessly past Greg as I struggled to get myself turned in the right direction.

I heard Beak asking Greg for directions.

"I'll catch the next eddy," I said, already twenty meters downstream.

Greg was talking to Beak; he just waved an affirmative at me.

The river was moving rapidly now. The lava in the center was almost entirely free of crust, and it glowed fiercely enough to blacken my faceplate.

I felt a strange exhilaration. Greg was right. My life was too much a product of the twenty-first century, stripped of its risk, bled of its variation and surprise. Repetitive. Experiences like this had to be sought out. They had to be manufactured if necessary. . . .

I stopped paddling. Had it come to that? Did I have to jump six parsecs into a river of molten rock before I could truly experience life? I smiled, imagining Chi's deep, liquid laughter at the absurdity of that thought.

I drifted for a minute, resting my arms. I looked around for the elongated, bright waves that seemed so independent of the rest of the flow. I found them off my port bow, moving a little ahead of the current. I lined myself up behind one, studying its motion. After a few strokes, I developed a rhythm, keyed to its undulations, that seemed effortless and sure.

Amid the rising smoke and the crackling lava, I felt chilled. Those waves . . . what were they? I couldn't explain them as a hydraulic phenomenon. I couldn't explain them at all.

The flow constricted and hooked to the left around a jutting black monolith. Most of the current piled up against the right shore—a low shelf of rock at the outside of the turn.

The ellipsoidal waves slid far to the right. As I swung around behind them, I noticed that the banks were quickly becoming cliffs that rose ten meters or more above the flow. A short distance ahead, a big eddy churned behind a hooked rock.

I'd missed a couple of smaller eddies earlier so as not to lose contact with the waves. Now I nosed over, planted my paddle across the eddy line and pulled myself in. I looked behind me; the waves were continuing downstream. I wanted very badly to follow them.

There was no sign of Greg or the others. I blinked sweat out of my eyes—not being able to wipe my forehead was a real nuisance—and squinted through the rising steam.

"Where are you, big brother?"

Static.

Suit to suit communications evidently weren't very good around a bend in the river. Finally I heard faint grunts and curses.

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" . . . lost Beak in the last rapid . . . came out of his boat. I'm fishing out gear. Where the hell are *you*?"

I guessed that Beak had flipped and failed to roll back up. The only thing he could do then was pop his spray skirt loose, swim out of his boat and get to shore quickly. The manufacturer estimated that our environment suits could handle submersion in lava for two to three minutes before the refrigeration failed.

Our plan had been to avoid those situations.

Finally, I heard the scrape of Beak's boat being dragged onto shore.

"Big brother, are you still there?" I asked.

"Yeah."

"Okay. I'm downriver—"

Dryly: "I had that figured out."

"—around a big left-hand bend."

Silence.

Then: "Not the turn with the big tombstone rock on the right?"

"Yeah, that's the one."

Silence again, static.

"You missed the takeout. You're in the canyon."

I looked around. It wasn't really a canyon, of course, it was an enormous fissure. Lava flows didn't last long enough to erode pre-existing rock on Epsilon Eridani VI. But it was deep and winding and precipitous just the same.

My stomach knotted up. "How long is it?"

"I don't know."

"Why the hell not?"

"Because we weren't planning on running it."

I closed my eyes. When I opened them again the walls seemed much closer.

Gordon's voice cut through the static. He must still have been on high ground. "Greg, you'd better get out. Get your boats two or three meters above the flow."

"What's up, Gordo?" Greg asked. The question sounded casual, but he spoke very clearly.

"The lake just rose—there was a huge bubble. It's up at least a meter. There's a big surge coming your way."

I could hear Greg's breathing. He could probably hear mine, too. I switched to a private channel.

"Greg, how am I supposed to take out? I'm up against a cliff."

"Can you climb it, abandon your boat?" Tension crackled in his voice.

"Not without ropes." I tried to keep my voice steady. "I think I'm going to have to run it. How long until the surge gets here?"

Greg checked back with Gordon. "Twenty minutes, maybe less. It's spreading out."

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I looked around. One of the wave-otters bobbed in an eddy just downstream. At rest it seemed awkward, a fluid-filled membrane, balloon-like and flattened in a vaguely finlike way at the back.

What *was* that thing? It couldn't be alive, obviously. Nothing organic could survive in molten rock.

Except that it didn't have to be organic. It could be built out of silicates, with iron or magnesium serving the role of nitrogen in a conventional biochemistry—

"I'm on my way, little brother."

I returned, reluctantly, to the river.

"No, Greg. Don't do it. There's nothing you can do to help."

No answer. A minute later I saw him swinging around the bend in the river, his paddle blades cutting through the smoke and the bright rock.

I heard Greg's breath burn in his throat. He struggled to stay upright as he hit the eddy lines at the apex of the turn. There was no grace in his strokes; he was running purely on strength.

"You shouldn't have come after me," I said, suddenly angry. I was responsible for him now.

He exited the turn well downstream of my position; I was going to have to catch him. I lifted my paddle. My arms felt light—almost weightless—not at all tired. The sound and turbulence of the lava fused with my anger into one sensation. I brought my paddle down sharply, leaned downstream and pulled out of the eddy with a single stroke.

The wave-otter swam out as I approached, and I fell in line behind it. I was almost close enough to touch the thing with my paddle, but it remained inscrutable. Its shape changed the moment I felt I could finally describe it.

I signaled to Greg.

"Follow me for a while."

He lumbered to river left, ignoring me, staying in front.

After a few minutes the canyon narrowed and the flow picked up speed. Here the lava was almost free of black crust. My faceplate adjusted to its brightness at the expense of contrast. The riverscape flattened. The fissure walls, no more than a dozen meters away, became featureless black planes. Only the lava had texture. Everything about it was smooth, even the breaking chop and the whorls of rising steam and the froth that splashed against the canyon walls.

The next bend in the river was a rock garden with ropes of lava twisting between shards of older rock. I followed the wave-otter rather than Greg, timing my strokes to its moves.

At one short drop the thing leapt free of the flow, dripping flaming rock that blackened as it fell. Joined with the flow again, the crea-

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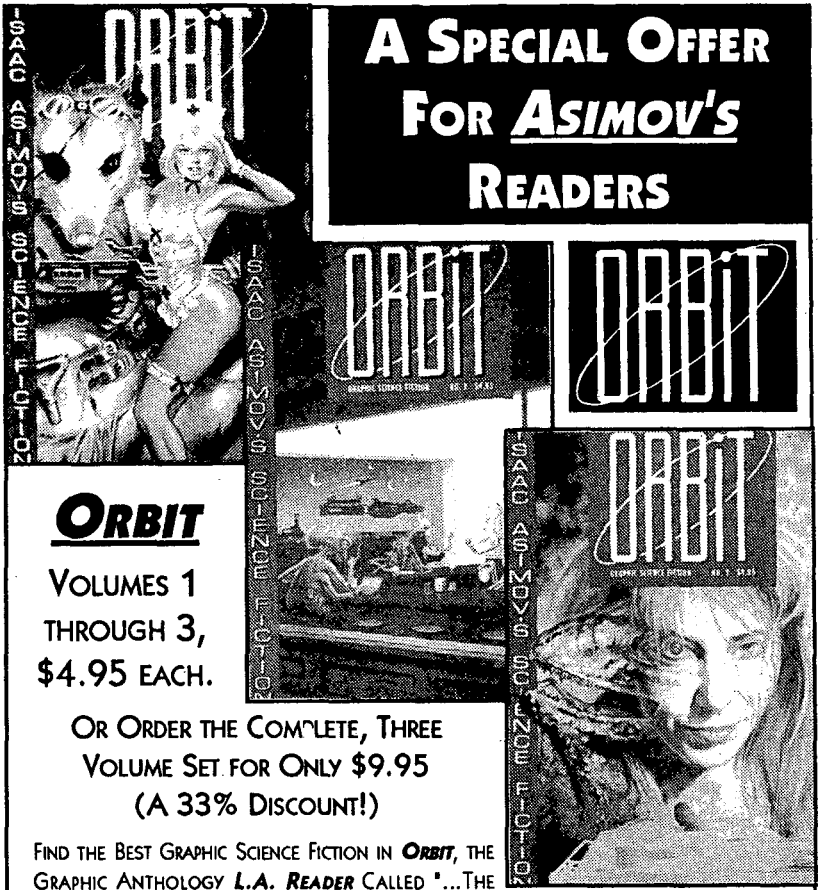

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ture—suddenly, I couldn't doubt its sentience—became discernable only by the way light reflected from its sleek surface.

A silicate matrix. Yes, it was just possible. Silicon bonded tetravalently, just like carbon. Certainly there was enough raw material. Silicate sheets, like mica, could form membranes. And the creature could oxidize refractory minerals in the flow for energy—not much energy, but the reaction kinetics in molten rock would be incredible. . . .

I was through the last of the channels a few seconds later. I turned around and looked upstream for Greg. He was entering the last drop, positioned badly. A second later he cut across a slashing eddy line that whipped him around and flipped him over.

I backpaddled while Greg rolled up and struggled toward me through the standing waves. He looked shrunken, shoulders hunched, all his swagger gone.

"Let me take the lead," I said.

Greg's black helmet nodded once, mutely.

I dug in. The front edge of the surge Gordon had warned us about must have reached us. The river drove me forward. I felt as much a part of it as my rock-otter.

The canyon walls constricted around us, and the rapids became almost continuous—ledges, rock gardens, narrow slots, ranks of standing waves. Each one made me feel stronger, faster, more agile.

I slid between two sharp rocks and twisted quickly to the right to avoid a flow reversal, found a second slot and was actually airborne for a moment before landing in a small, quiet pool.

"Wait," Greg said breathlessly, only a few strokes behind me, "I need to rest."

"We aren't far ahead of the main surge. I can feel it."

"I just need a minute. This canyon opens up soon, I think. We'll be all right then."

I looked downstream. The canyon walls widened a little at the limit of my vision. Maybe. I shook my head. "Let's go."

The pool was ending. I spotted the rock-otter heading for a narrow channel at river left. The right channel looked wider and smoother, but I turned left without hesitation, following my bright companion.

The roar of descending rock sounded a deep organ note, felt more than heard. The power of the river shivered up the blade of my paddle and into my arms, into my brain.

The rapid was a serpent, negotiated with a brace and a flick of my paddle. At the bottom, I turned around and looked for Greg. He hadn't followed me; he'd taken the right channel. He was still at the top of the last drop, turned sideways. He bounced off a rock, fell a meter or more,

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then landed in a vicious reversal. I saw him flip, vanish from sight briefly, and finally wash out into the chop. He had to try twice before he managed to right himself.

He waved his arms strangely.

"Are you all right, Greg?"

"I can't see!" There was an edge of hysteria in his voice.

"Scrape your faceplate," I said, annoyed by his spastic motions. "It's covered with lava."

"*I can't see,*" he repeated. "My legs are burning. There must be a tear in my suit."

I checked the telemetry. "There's nothing wrong. Your temperature readings are fine. You're sweating, that's all."

Greg calmed gradually and wiped the cooling rock from his helmet.

"You're okay?" I asked.

He nodded.

"What happened?"

"I didn't . . . get over soon enough." His words came out between gasps. "The river swept me to the right." He rested his paddle in front of him. "I can't do it. I can't go any farther."

I took a stroke toward him. "That's not one of our options, Greg. Be reasonable. There can't be much more of this."

He curled over his front deck, like a question mark. There was no fire left in him. "I just spent my last silver bullet, little brother. I knew it would happen sooner or later. I just can't do it."

"*No.* Listen to me. We can get through this." I spoke with all the certainty I could summon. "We have a guide."

From ahead came the deep rumble of an approaching rapid, far louder than anything I'd heard before. The walls were narrowing again. I looked for a place to eddy out and found none. At the far end of the pool, a huge black rock split the horizon line in half. Lava poured over the ledges on both sides in gouts of pure orange light.

"We have to move," I said. "The flow's rising again."

Greg drifted inertly, his paddle resting on his front deck. The rapid was less than thirty meters away. The wave-otter swam in a lazy circle in front of us. I pointed to it.

"Do you see that?"

"What?"

"That ripple in the surface with the flukes in back. Do you see how it moves? It's not part of the river. It's alive. I've been following it."

Greg sat perfectly still.

"I'm serious. It always finds the best way through the rapids. I don't know how."

Our hulls collided with a clang. Greg still didn't move.

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"Greg, please. Just *believe* me for once."

He shook his head. "How can anything live here? It would burn up."

"*Not if it was made of rock.*" I didn't know where to begin. "I haven't really had time to work out the biochemistry yet—I haven't had time to work out any of this yet. But it wouldn't take much. Just a slight rearrangement of the elements in the medium. A little more order, a little more structure. That's all life is, really."

The black wrap-rock at the top of the rapid grew as I spoke, tearing a tooth-shaped hole in the sky. The fissure walls blocked out any illumination from above. I felt disoriented, as if I were suspended upside down beneath a boiling cloud of light.

Dropping over a small ledge, the creature jumped free of the flow for a second, then moved to the left.

"Did you see that?" I asked. I had to shout over the rapids now. "Did you see how it moved?"

I heard Greg mutter: "Jesus."

We were ten meters from the main drop. Lava churned and spattered at the base of the big rock at its center. The wave-creature lined itself up with the left chute. I slid in behind it. I saw Greg lift his paddle, hesitate.

The river shook me like a jackhammer. The noise blotted out any thought.

I shouted: "Left, Greg. Go left!"

He drifted, motionless, for another sound-shattered second, then took two hard strokes to the right. Just before the rock-tooth sheared between us I saw him raise his paddle slowly free of the river.

I braced hard, trying to hold my position in the pounding flow. The lava-creature breached and passed over the ledge, riverlight glittering on its teardrop belly.

At the last moment I saw over the ledge. It was an unobstructed drop into a pool five meters below. Then I was airborne, weightless. The pool, crusted black, flew silently toward me and swallowed the nose of my boat up to the coaming.

My body whipped forward at the impact. Muscles and ligaments tore in my back. The lava held my boat for a second, then expelled it like a bubble, flipping me end over end until I landed, miraculously upright and at rest.

A minute passed before I would wipe the rock from my faceplate and look back upstream. The sound of the falls was already remote. I searched the right channel, the route Greg had taken. It splashed over ranks of basalt needles and wound through deeply undercut boulders. A suicide run.

There was no sign of Greg's boat.

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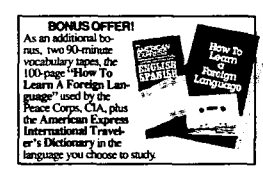

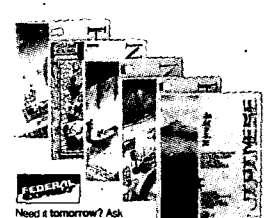

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Long, smooth-topped waves rolled past, slapping against the canyon walls and turning me downstream.

"Greg?" I whispered. "Can you hear me?"

A swell swept by. One of its echoes shoved my boat against the wall at the far left of the pool with a hollow thud.

"Greg . . . "

Just downriver the canyon walls dropped off dramatically. A hundred meters away, at the inside of a left-hand turn, was a broad shelf where I could beach my boat.

The wave-creature breached beside me, paused above its own concentric ripples and fell back with a splash.

I paddled closer to the creature. "How are you going to get back upstream?" I asked it. "You'll never be able to jump those falls."

Nothing happened. I don't know what I expected.

The creature leapt clear of the flow again.

"What's the matter, little guy?"

Then I felt it. The river shook with an intense subsonic rumble. A tremendous wave of lava poured over the falls, knocking rocks loose and roaring toward us in a river-wide bore.

There was no question of out-distancing it. All I could do was point myself downstream and brace as the wave swept me forward. I was lifted until the river plain opened up below me. I could see where the flow swung around, then spread into a vast, cracked delta of cooling rock.

The wave slewed left as it rounded the bend, flowing over the low inside bank. I braced against the force that wanted to twist me further downstream. Tendons screamed in my back and arms. I was high up in the curl, where the flow was still smooth and uniform, but I caught a glimpse of the lava-creature below me, thrashing in the black turbulence at the wave's base.

My edge of the bore lost force as it rode up the shelving bank. I spent the last of my strength holding my position while foam and spray surged around me. I windmilled desperately, fighting my way inch by inch up the bank as the broken flank of the wave receded.

I took one more stroke and felt my keel touch solid rock.

I lay on a tilted black plain, unable to release my grip on my paddle. Pain slashed like a knife in my back. Below me, pseudopods of lava retreated toward the main flow. I searched the bank. Five meters further up the slope the wave-creature writhed on the jagged surface.

I tore my hands free and ripped off my spray skirt, pulled myself out of my boat. My legs collapsed beneath me when I tried to stand. I struggled back to my knees and crawled the rest of the way.

The creature stopped moving as I reached it, its body twisted unre-

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cognizably. Escaping gas bubbles pocked smooth skin that turned from orange to red as I watched, then from red to black.

The river seeped up the bank one more time, its steaming fingers just touching the battered hull of my boat. Receding, it deposited a glossy, spherical object half-filled with cooling lava.

Greg's helmet.

Our carryall jolted toward me across the wrinkled landscape, stopping a few meters from my boat. Beak and Gordon got out. They looked wordlessly at the helmet, then looked at me.

"What happened?" Beak asked uncertainly. "You were out of sight. . . ."

Tendrils of smoke rose from the now-still river surface and curled around us like attenuated fingers.

I hesitated. I didn't know how to answer. The truth was upstream, irretrievable. Greg had bought my silence forever in that moment at the top of the falls.

I watched the smoke rise toward the empty sky. Then I did what I had to do: I told them the official story. I explained how Greg had followed me after I'd blundered into the canyon, how he'd led me unerringly through the rapids and preceded me over that last big drop. I repeated his calm, final message warning me to take the other channel as a ton of lava impaled him on a basalt spire. It was the story I'd be telling my father and my mother, the story I'd be repeating for the rest of my life.

I walked back to the edge of the river, picked up his helmet and flung it as far out over the flow as my suit motors could manage.

I turned back to Gordon and Beak. They stood silently, respecting my grief. In truth, I felt none. Chi would understand. Greg had what he wanted. He'd finished defining himself. I'd just started, however. I was responsible for my brother's death. How could I put down the work he'd left undone? Suddenly I saw the price I'd have to pay—in the end, I'd have to *become* my brother.

A sigh of escaping steam sounded near me, rising sharply in pitch. I squinted in the dull red riverlight. There was a dull crack, and the frozen rock-otter split unevenly in two. I knelt and touched its moist interior, tracing the dark cross-sections of its internal organs. I shook my head. Our expedition completely lacked the tools I needed to understand this creature. I needed micromanipulators, spectrometers, microscopes, calorimeters. It was a project no research institution would touch. I'd need sponsors and a leave from my job. I'd need a team.

Gordon and Beak still hadn't moved. They were looking at me with a queer intensity; I knew what they wanted: I knew what they *needed*. Someone to follow. Someone like me.

"Load my boat onto the carryall," I said curtly. "We have a lot to do." ●

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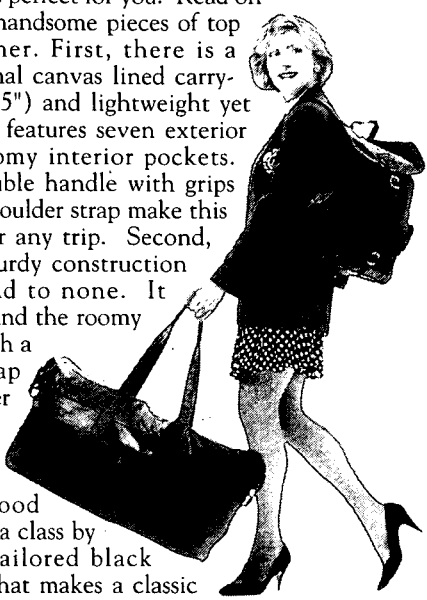

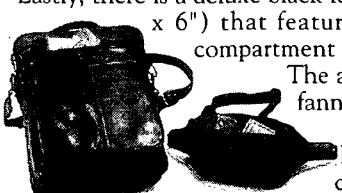

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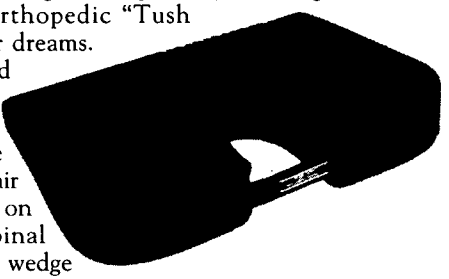

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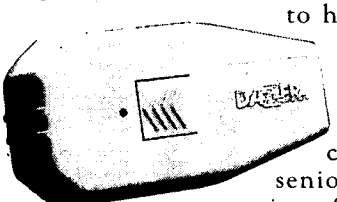

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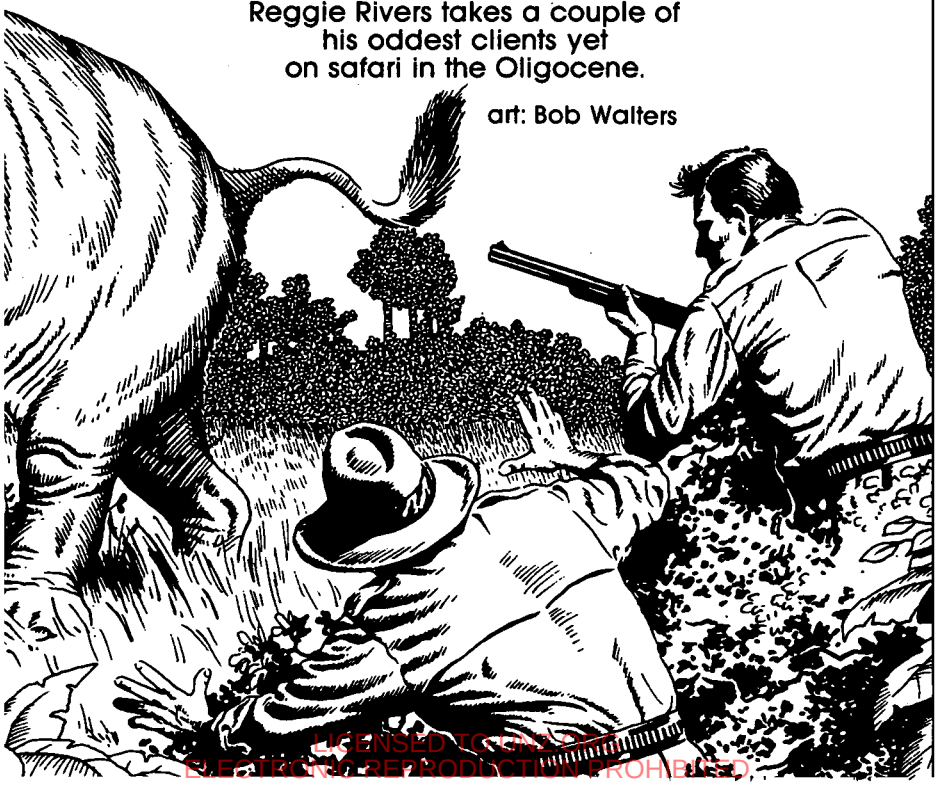
Reggie Rivers takes a couple of
his oddest clients yet
on safari in the Oligocene.

art: Bob Walters



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How's that, Miss Bergstrom? My strangest client? Let's see. . . . There was . . . come to think, I'm sure the balmiest was young Standish, Clifton Standish. Of course you'll be careful of using people's true names in your story, because of the chance of lawsuits.

I first heard about Standish when I got back from taking a party of paleontologists to the Permian, so they could settle arguments over which kind of Permian lizard was the ancestor of the dinosaurs, and which of the mammals, and all the rest. They explained that most of these creatures weren't really lizards but belonged to other orders. But they looked like lizards and scuttled like lizards, so I'm willing to call them "lizards," just as we call all members of two quite distinct later reptilian orders "dinosaurs."

The Raja—that is, my partner, Chandra Aiyar—had been holding down the office in my absence. One day this bloke Standish came in with his friend Hofmann, saying they wanted a time safari to cave-man days, to shoot dinosaurs the way our ancestors used to do.

The Raja told me: "I explained that this was jolly well impossible, since dinosaurs disappeared from the Earth sixty-odd million years ago, and the first organisms one could rightly call 'men' didn't appear till about four or five million years ago, when they were still pretty apeish. Also it took them another couple of million years to learn to hunt large, dangerous game. I cited the authorities, but I'm afraid they didn't believe me; they wanted to speak to you. I think I detected a touch of ethnic prejudice."

"You know I won't stand for that sort of thing," I said. "Did you throw them out of the office?"

"No, Reggie. Knowing you were due back shortly, I made another appointment for them. In fact, I think that buzzer means they're here now."

Standish and Hofmann came in and were introduced. Both were in their early thirties, but different in looks. Frank Hofmann was a good-sized bloke with the build of a former football player, now beginning to show a bit of fat. Dark hair, receding, and a little dark mustache.

What you noticed first of all about Standish was his height; he must have topped two hundred centimeters. I'm a good-sized bod, but he stared down at me. He had a decided stoop, probably from ducking door lintels. He was a skinny fellow with blond hair and blue eyes, clean-shaven, wearing gold-rimmed glasses. He thrust out a hand and bawled at me:

"*Jambo, bwana!*"

It had been some years since I was last in East Africa, but I managed to recall enough Kiswahili to answer:

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"Hujambo, rafiki yangu! Unataka nini?"

That bloody well shut Standish up. Hofmann spoke next: "Mr. Rivers, we want a safari to the days of the dinosaurs, so we can hunt them the way our cave-man ancestors did. Mr. Aiyar says we can't. Is it true they lived at entirely different times?"

"Absolutely," I said. "If the Raja tells you something like that, you can take it as fair dinkum; he knows the field as well as I do. I've seen enough Mesozoic landscapes to have a good idea, and there was never any sign of human beings."

Hofmann looked around uneasily. "Mind if I smoke?" he said.

"No. Hand him that ashtray, Raja, will you?"

Hofmann lit a cigarette. "Sorry; I'm a genuine addict. I once tried to stop it; but after a year without smoking, the craving was just as strong as ever. So I said what the hell? and gave up." He blew rings.

"But," said Standish, in a strained, high-pitched voice, "how about all those movies and comic strips that show men chasing dinosaurs and vice versa?"

"If you believe that Alice fell down a rabbit hole, or crawled through a mirror into Looking-Glass Land—you've read Lewis Carroll's 'Alice' books, of course?"

Those two looked blankly at each other. No offense, Miss Bergstrom, but I can't say I'm overwhelmed by your American educational system, if upper-class blokes grow up in such ignorance of the classics.

I explained, as patiently as I could, that something in fiction proves nothing about the real world. I went into the geological eras, but the argument ground on and on without getting anywhere. Standish was one of those coves a little loose in the top paddock, who won't give up an idea no matter how wrong you prove it. He was still muttering about cave men and dinosaurs when I said:

"Now look here, sport! Would you, today, buy a ticket to France on the theory that you'd meet Napoleon?"

"No, of course not—oh, I see what you're driving at. All right. Then let's go back to the dinosaur age, the one you call the Missi—Mesa—"

"Mesozoic," I said.

"Okay, Mesozoic. We'll still go hunting dinosaurs, even if there aren't any Neanderthal men around to watch us do it."

"Very well," I said. "The next thing is armament. Have you your own guns, or will you rent them from Rivers and Aiyar?"

"Thought I'd take my Bratislava 11-millimeter," said Hofmann.

"That's a good gun," I said. It actually has a higher muzzle energy than my old Continental 600, and is also a magazine rifle. With four in

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the magazine and one in the chamber, you're better off if a dinosaur or whatever comes after you than you would be with a double-barrel like mine. On the other hand, it's a heavy bastard—must weigh over ten kilos—to lug round rough Mesozoic country, where the ground is bloody uneven. The grasses had not yet begun to take over the bare ground in the Cretaceous, so erosion was faster than in similar wild country today. I next asked:

"How about you, Mr. Standish?"

"Oh," he said, "I don't plan to take a gun at all."

"Mean you're a camera fan? That's okay."

"No, that's not what I meant. I'm going to kill a dinosaur all right, but the way our ancestors would have done it—with a bow and arrow."

"What on earth—"

"I'll explain. You see, I'm really a barbarian at heart. A psychic once told me I'd been a barbarian in a previous life, and I knew right away what she meant. It all fitted together."

"You mean you think you're a reincarnation of Attila the Hun or one of those types?"

"Exactly, though I can't say whether it was Attila or somebody else. I don't think I could have been a Hun, since they were Mongolians and I'm a Nordic type. Maybe a Goth or a Viking."

"Never heard that souls were given a choice of bodies in their next lives," I said. "But I can tell you right now, I bloody well won't lead any jaunt into the Mesozoic for bow hunting."

"Why not?"

"Look, sport. Have you ever killed a large reptile of any kind?"

"N-no."

"Well, I can tell you they're damned hard to kill—much harder than mammals or birds. That is, they can absorb fatal damage that would instantly lay out a mammal or bird of that size and still remain active long enough to kill you dead. The fact that such a reptile later lay down and died of its wounds wouldn't be much consolation."

"I'll take my chances—"

"You can take all the chances with your life you bloody well wish, but not with our business. Losing a client is one of the worst things that can happen to us. . . ."

That argument ground on for another half-hour, till I wondered whether taking on these clients was worth the money they'd pay us. At last Standish said:

"All right then, suppose we don't go clear back to the Age of Dinosaurs. Why can't we go back to this Plasticene" (He meant Pleistocene) "when men lived with mammoths and saber-toothed tigers?"

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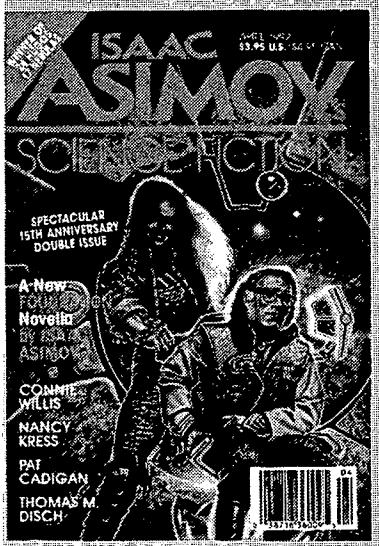

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"Sorry, but we're not allowed to send parties into that period."

"Why not?" he asked.

"Because they're afraid we might interact with those human beings and alter subsequent history. Can't have that sort of thing in a logical universe. The instant you start to do that, the space-time forces snap you back to Present. The effect is like being dropped from an aircraft a kilometer up. Nobody survives it."

Standish took off his glasses, wiped them, and put them back on. He said: "I read somewhere that the ancestors of the Native Americans only arrived in the Americas ten or twenty thousand years ago. Why couldn't we go back to a little before they arrived? Plenty of big game, like those mastodons and things that got caught in the tar in California."

"Sorry; still off-limits. They're afraid we might meet the first immigrants from Siberia, especially since there's a wide disagreement about their date of arrival. Some think they came over much sooner than others do."

Standish furrowed his brow. "But couldn't we go back to a time earlier in the Age of Mammals, but still later than the dinosaurs?"

"Right-o. We've taken groups to every epoch from the Paleocene to the Pliocene." (Actually, we are allowed the earliest Pleistocene in North America; but I thought that too dangerous for this rather eccentric pair.)

"What sort of trophies do those different periods have?"

I got down one of our reference books, which had pages of drawings to scale of contemporary mammals from the epochs and continents of the Cenozoic. For instance, there's a page that shows the principal forms from the lower Miocene of South America; another illustrating the Eocene of eastern Asia; and so on.

Standish, who seemed the dominant one of the pair even though the goofier, thumbed through the book. He and Hofmann muttered over the pictures. Finally Standish said:

"Mr. Rivers, the handsomest trophies shown in here are from the Old World, like that *Baluchitherium* and those dinotheres. The weirdest are some of those from South America. Could we get to one of those?"

"Afraid not," I said. "Professor Prochaska's transition chamber travels back in time but keeps the same latitude and longitude. It must, to make bloody sure it materializes back in the present in the exact place it departed from. If it didn't, we might have a monster explosion."

"Then," said Hofmann, "let's go over the North American faunas again, Cliff."

There was another wait for them to make up their minds, if that is the word I want. The Raja and I spent the time totting up the accounts of my Permian safari. Then Standish spoke:

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"Mr. Rivers, I think we want to go to the Oily—the Oligocene, to get ourselves a brontothere head or two. The critters from the later North American periods seem to be mostly smaller; until we get to the Plasticene, they all look pretty much alike, like hornless sheep and goats, without the wool."

A brontothere, Miss Bergstrom? They were the largest of the titanotheres, dominant in the early Oligocene and related to modern horses and rhinos. The big ones looked like elephant-sized rhinos, except that instead of one or two horns on the centerline of the skull, they had a pair of blunt horns side by side on the nose. My scientific friends say those bumps are not technically horns, but mere bony outgrowths of the skull, covered in life by hard skin. But for practical purposes we call them "horns."

Anyway, we agreed to make this trip to the Oligocene, about the time of the White River formation in Wyoming and Colorado. We don't have a formation of that date in this part of the States, but it must have held a similar fauna, with local differences.

We set the date of departure for a fortnight ahead, to give our clients time to get ready. Then we got a call from a Professor Huang Xijing of the University of Nanjing, asking if he could go on this safari, too. He said he didn't intend to hunt; instead he hoped to settle some scientific questions. Since his university was putting up the money, we were glad to have him; every additional client helps to pay the time-chamber fees, which are bloody steep. The thing uses fantastic amounts of electric power.

Before the date of departure, I went to my friends on your newspaper staff and got them to look up the good oil on these two. Seems they were boyhood chums. Nothing remarkable in Hofmann's record; as I guessed, he had played football in college, but flunked out. Standish had never gone at all. He'd been sent to that fancy school where there was a big scandal around twenty years ago, with a lot of—ah—

Thank you, Miss Bergstrom. Since you say so, it was half the boys buggering one another *and* the teacher. I wouldn't have put it quite so—ah—baldly to a lady, but . . . I don't think your editor will let you get away with it; but that's your problem.

Since then, Clifton Standish had held a few jobs, none of which lasted long; and he'd done a spot of traveling. Frank Hofmann's adult record was similar. Since both were filthy rich, they didn't have to worry about their tucker. Standish hadn't been one of the homosexual gang at the school; but he felt tainted by having gone there and was determined to

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prove his masculinity. This, I suspected, accounted for his itch to play cave man.

I learned one thing more that gave me pause. Seems Hofmann had married the girl that Standish had been courting for several years.

One other preliminary was to check out the clients on the range, to judge how far they were to be trusted with guns. I met the pair there, Hofmann with his Bratislava and Standish with his bow. The gun was straightforward, and Hofmann proved himself a reasonably good shot.

Standish's bow looked like no bow I'd ever seen. The bow proper was an arc of some metal-and-plastic combination, with offsets so the arrow went through the centerline. Instead of a plain cord, the string was led through pulleys. The bow had a sight, adjustable for range and windage. Robin Hood would never have recognized the thing. Standish said:

"You don't think I can kill things with this, Reggie? Set me up a board, two centimeters thick, and I'll show you!"

The board was set up, and Standish sent an arrow clear through it, so that the head stuck out on the further side.

"Okay," I said, "so long as you remember not to shoot at anything without the word from me."

On the appointed day, we gathered in the time-chamber building. Although it was the Raja's turn to lead a party in the field while I manned the office, he wasn't going because his wife was expecting. I was there with Standish, Hofmann, the Chinese professor—a pleasant enough little bloke—and our supporting cast: Ming the cook, Beauregard Black the camp boss, his three helpers, and a dozen asses. You'd call 'em burros, I suppose. Why don't we use motorized transport? That's a long story; remind me to tell you some time.

In the Cretaceous, the chamber materializes on a fairly high ridge, giving a good view of the surrounding country. By the Oligocene, that ridge had disappeared. The country is still somewhat rolling, and the chamber wallah set us down on a low rise, with a bushy flat on one side and several clumps of trees nearby.

Once you get past the K-T Event, which ended the Mesozoic and the dinosaurs along with it, the vegetation looks quite modern. Where we were, the trees ran to oaks, cedars, and maples much like those of today, although I daresay a paleobotanist could point out differences.

Despite the trees, we could see fairly well, though the view did not compare with the one we got in the Cretaceous from that point. The ground sloped in directions different from the Cretaceous ones. In the Cretaceous there's a river, which the Raja has named the Narbada, emptying into the Kansas Sea. It's only half a day's trek south from the

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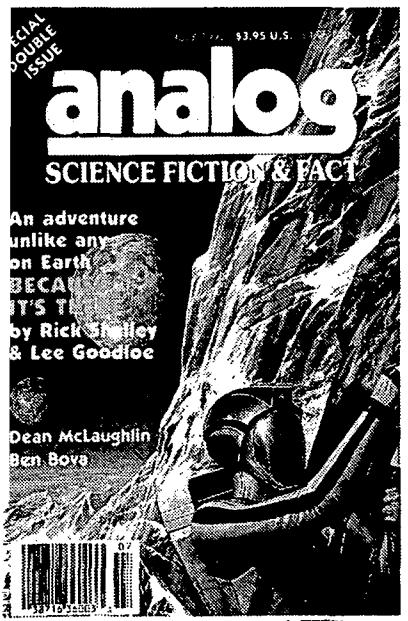

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chamber site. By the Oligocene, this river had disappeared along with the Kansas Sea.

Instead, there was a bigger stream flowing south about a kilometer west from our site. I don't know if it evolved into the modern Mississippi. We shall know better when the U. S. Geological Survey completes their survey of the area round the chamber site over the geological eras. They have a neat little gadget, a rocket-propelled robot camera. It shoots straight up from the site, deploys a parachute, and snaps pictures on the way down.

Following our usual drill, I hopped out first with my gun ready, although I didn't expect to find anything dangerous waiting for us. The chamber and then Reg Rivers, however, startled the hell out of a spotted feline, devouring its prey on an open space a few meters from the site. In size it was a bit smaller than a leopard or a puma, with a long tail and a pair of big, protruding upper canine teeth. It was, I believe, an ancestor of the later sabertooths, although its sabers had developed only half as far as those of later members of the family.

Be that as it may, this cat took one look, gave a kind of spitting yowl, and bounded away, dragging a piece of its half-eaten prey with it.

"What pity!" murmured Huang, looking at the remains of the prey animal. "It is one of the oreodonts, or merycoidodontids if one must be technically precise. My main purpose in coming to this period is to study their digestive systems, but this one has been too badly torn up to furnish much information."

"What about their digestive systems?" I asked.

"One of the debates among my fellow paleontologists is which of the many lines of Cenozoic artiodactyls—" Excuse me, Miss Bergstrom, but that's how Doctor Huang talked, like a textbook. He meant split-hooved animals, like sheep, cows, and deer. "—of Cenozoic artiodactyls developed the multiple stomachs of ruminants and which did not. The oreodonts are thought by some to have developed this feature, and by others not. One scientist called them 'ruminating hogs.' The question cannot be settled by fossils, since the soft tissues are almost never preserved."

The day after we arrived, I told my sahibs we were going out on our regular meat hunt. When we were assembled, Hofmann had on his regular khaki safari rig, including one of those canvas vests with enough pockets to carry supplies for a month in the field. He toted his Bratislava.

Huang carried a big collecting bag and had an assortment of knives and other dissecting utensils stuck through loops in his belt. He explained that he was no gunman but would rely on Hofmann and me to protect him.

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Clifton Standish showed up carrying his futuristic bow, but he wasn't wearing a bloody thing else except an athletic support—I believe the Yank term is "jock"—made of some fur, which looked like bear. He also wore sandals and had his quiver slung over his back.

"What in Aljira's name?" I said.

"I am a barbarian at heart!" cried Standish. "I've always wanted to face the wilds as a true barbarian should!"

I could have pointed out that the eyeglasses and the futuristic bow rather spoiled the picture; but there was no point in quarreling with a cash customer. I only said:

"Okay, if you don't mind the bug bites and don't get badly sunburned."

So off we went. After a bit of a hike we came upon an agriochoerid browsing. It was about the size of a medium-large dog. Although it's a vegetarian, with a head not unlike that of one of our asses, it has feet like a dog's, with blunt claws.

Standish drew his arrow to the ear, in proper Agincourt style, released—and missed. The animal jerked its head up at the whistle of the arrow. While it was looking round, Hofmann gave it a bullet from his rifle.

He hit the beast all right. The trouble was that with a dinosaur-killer like the Bratislava, the impact spreads a small creature like an agriochoerid over the landscape.

"That's a funny combination," said Hofmann. "A kind of hornless goat with dog's feet!"

Standish said: "I read an article once on the giant panda of China. It said it was once a meat-eater like wolves and cats but for some reason took to eating bamboo instead and developed teeth and a gullet to enable it to do so. Could this be the same sort of thing: an animal that started out to be a wolf and changed its mind?"

"I don't believe so," I said. "According to my scientific friends, nearly all mammals had feet like those back in the early Eocene, regardless of their diets. This kind was a plant-eater all along but forgot to evolve its paws into hooves."

Looking at the spread-out remains, Huang uttered what I took to be Chinese curses. Then he said:

"What pity! I shall have difficulty in coming to definite conclusions from this mass of dispersed viscera. Mr. Rivers, is there not a smaller rifle for such game?"

"Yes, there is," I said. "But Frank wanted to bring his cannon in case we met something bigger."

Huang sighed. "At least, you will wish mainly the limbs and other

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muscular parts for aliment. I shall do what I can with the internal organs."

So, while Hoffman and Standish and I butchered and cut out the more edible parts of the agriochoerid, Huang squatted over the spilled guts, turning over this and that internal organ, popping some of them into his bag, and getting bloody all over. Standish obviously did not like this sort of job. He turned a little green but manfully stuck to his task, though so clumsy at it that Hofmann and I could, I am sure, have done the job faster without his help.

By the time the meat was ready to go, Huang looked up with a smile. "It is not so bad as I feared," he said. "I believe that I have identified a separate division of the digestive tract combining, in a primitive way, features of the rumen and the reticulum. One might say that this animal was well on the way to evolving into a full ruminant."

We went out for the next two days. We saw plenty of animals, but all were small, nondescript ancestors of modern horses, rhinos, camels, etcetera, the size of dogs of different breeds and all looking much alike. Hardly a horn amongst the lot, save the little *Protoceras*, a kind of ancestral pronghorn scarcely bigger than a jackrabbit. It has two pairs of hornlike bumps on the head of the male. But neither of my hunters wanted it for a trophy; too small, they said.

My clients got itchy over our endless walk through an outdoor zoo, stocked with a rather prosaic lot of smallish beasts. These animals all looked remarkably alike, despite the fact that their descendants varied enormously in size and appearance. So I told Beauregard to pack up to shift camp the following day. We should go westward to the river that, I had heard, ran south past the chamber site.

The trek took off before sunrise. Standish went in front in his cave-man outfit, muttering things like: "Yield thee, civilized degenerate weakling!"

The thought struck me that, if Standish got much more peculiar, we might have to tie him up. The Raja's better at handling disturbed minds than I, but he was not with us.

It was a bright, hot day when we stopped for lunch. Beauregard's crew had unsaddled the asses and staked them out to browse. We were munching our sandwiches when Standish made some remark about how much more sensibly he was dressed than we were; our khakis were all pretty sweat-soaked.

We were sitting in a circle, eating, when Hofmann muttered an exclamation. In one motion he gulped down his mouthful of sandwich, grabbed his gun, and bounced to his feet.

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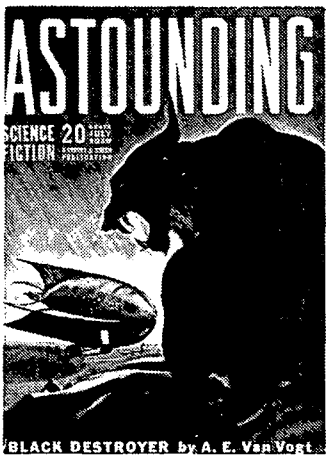

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I looked behind me. Headed for the staked asses at a shambling run came the biggest predator of that time and place, a hyaenodon of the largest species, *H. horridus*. It was about the size of a tiger, with similar stripes but with a longer skull, more like that of an oversized wolf or hyena, and an impressive set of canine fangs. Despite the name, it's really no horrider than any other big predator, programmed by its teeth and its instincts to eat other animals.

I was rising with my gun when Hofmann fired. It was one of the best-executed shots I have seen in all my guiding. He nailed the hyaenodon between the eyes, and down it went.

Nobody argued that Hofmann had not won his trophy fair dinkum. But I asked:

"What are you going to take home, Frank? Just the head? If so, I'll help you cut it off. Or you may decide to make a fur rug out of it. That means skinning the whole animal and separating out the skull, so the taxidermist can stretch the skin of the head over it."

"I think I'd like the rug," said Hofmann. "But it would take us all afternoon to skin it."

"Then," said Standish, "we'd better carry the creature with us until the camp is pitched again."

"Sure," said Hofmann. "We'll sling it on the carrying pole, and Cliff and I will each take one end."

"I don't know," I said. "Better think about what you're letting yourselves in for. The thing must weigh well over a hundred kilos. Oh, Beauregard!"

"Yes, Mr. Rivers?"

"Could we use an ass or two to carry this animal?"

"I don't think so," said Black. "They're scared shitless now, and if we even moved that thing near them, they'd go real sure frantic. Besides, they're full-loaded now, and you gents would have to carry their loads."

We ended by eviscerating the carcass, roping it to the pole, and struggling over many kilometers with the thing on our shoulders. Hofmann and Standish, who had talked boldly of carrying it the whole way, were glad to have little Huang, who was no muscle man, and me spell them with the carrying.

Slowed by this load, we got to the river after sunset. Standish suffered from insect bites. At the new campsite, the mosquitoes went to work on him. After much slapping and cursing, he was at last persuaded to put on a shirt and pants.

"While you're about it," I said, "better take a good look for ticks. With all those long grasses and herbs we've waded through, you should be hosting a few of them."

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Sure enough, examination by electric torch showed a dozen or so on Standish's legs, busily drilling away. None had had time to suck much blood yet, and we got them out with a glowing cigarette in Hofmann's hands. We were lucky, since hardly anyone smokes nowadays. If you simply pull a tick out, the head often breaks off and remains in the skin to give you trouble.

Standish said: "Does this mean I'm liable to come down with spotted fever or something?"

"Don't know for sure, but I doubt it," I told him. "So far back, you'll find bloody few microorganisms that can live in a human bloodstream long enough to cause an illness."

Then he complained of sunburn. When he took off his shirt, his face, shoulders, and back were the color of a tropical sunset. As I swabbed him down with lotion, I said:

"All right, my lad, that's the last time I shall let you run around all day dressed as Ug-Wug the cave man. If you come down with something serious, aside from my little store of antibiotics, there's not a damned thing I can do for you until the chamber comes back, ten days from now."

With a face as long as a month of Sundays, Standish muttered a surly assent. Then he said: "Maybe the Great Spirit just doesn't want me to be a real barbarian." His lower lip quivered as if he were going to burst into tears.

"Come, come, Cliff!" said Hofmann. "You've had your fun. We pale North European types can't take so much sun, because our ancestors lived where it was cloudy most of the time."

The remark showed better sense than I should have expected from that pair. Skinning the hyaenodon kept us busy all evening.

The day after the move, my sahibs were pretty tired, not being hardened to such activity. I gave Hofmann and Standish the day off, but I went after Huang, saying:

"Professor, you've bloody well got to wash those khakis. The blood of that agriochoerid has begun to stink so that all the others are complaining."

He looked vague. "But Mr. Rivers, can you not get one of the camp crew to wash them for us?"

"Not their job, and they've got plenty to do."

"But, sir, I have never washed a garment of my own! I do not know how!"

"I'll give you a hand and show you how. Hey, Beauregard, will you dig us out a scrubbing brush and a piece of soap, please?"

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I led Huang, still muttering objections, down to the river. A couple of alligators were sunning on the sandy margin, but they slipped into the water and swam away as we approached.

One thing you must remember in going back to former eras is that the animals, never having seen human beings and never having been hunted by them, don't have the built-in fear of people that you find in areas of the Present where wild animals are still wild. Instead of running away, as they're apt to do now, they may come sniffing round you to investigate these strange creatures at close quarters. That can be dangerous, even if you have no intention of killing anything.

Huang and I spent a couple of hours at the cleaning job. The blood had dried and so was much harder to get off than if we had done it the day Huang got his clothes mucked up.

Next morning I rose early to get the sahibs up for some animal watching, since the beasts are better seen along the river at this time than during the heat of the day. Standish was already dressing, I was glad to see in his regular khakis, including a safari vest like Hofmann's, and not in his cave-man get-up.

"Where's Frank?" I asked.

"He went out earlier to look at animals on his own."

"Damn!" I said. "He knows he's not supposed to go buzzing round the outback without a guide!"

I was interrupted by a loud bang from the direction of the river; Hofmann's Bratislava without a doubt. Then came three more shots.

I dashed out of the tent, grabbed my own rifle, and ran toward the sound. As I came in sight of Frank Hofmann, he let off another shot, aimed out into the river.

"What the hell are you doing, Frank?" I shouted.

"Just shooting at some alligators," he said. "I think I hit a couple."

"What for?" I asked.

"Thought I'd like a couple of skins to take home. But they sink when I hit them, so I don't know how I could recover them"

I gave him an eloquent calling-down for wandering off unescorted. I didn't go into the ethics of killing things of no use to the killer, just for fun. Too much talk of that sort would be bad for our business. I know that's how many people feel nowadays; but I assure them that, since the things we kill are all long extinct anyway, it's not as if we were doing in some endangered species.

Frank Hofmann, I must say, took his wigging very well. He apologized and promised not to do anything like that again. We went back to camp,

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ate the breakfast Ming served us, and set out along the east bank, detouring where the gallery forest along the banks grew so thick a dog couldn't bark in it.

We had gone perhaps half a kilometer when Huang and I, in the lead, spotted something moving ahead. When we got closer, I saw an amynodont, a big hippolike herbivore, munching greenery. Beside me, Huang said:

"Mr. Rivers, that is a *Metamynodon,* of the family Amynodontidae, superfamily Rhinoceroidea, order Perissodactyla. I very much want some pictures." He adjusted his camera. "How close can we get?"

"A hundred meters is considered the minimum safe distance for thick-skinned game like that," I said. "We'd better circle round to the left, to get down-wind of him."

The other two had come up with us and were peering through field glasses—Hofmann's pair, which he and Standish looked through alternately.

"Huh!" said Standish. "I don't want him for a trophy; no horns or antlers, and not so spectacular as a modern hippo."

Let me explain, Miss Bergstrom. The *Metamynodon* is, you might say, a member of a branch of the rhinoceros tribe that tried to evolve into hippopotami and didn't quite make it. In build it is much like a modern rhinoceros, without any horns and not quite so squatty as the modern hippo. The hippo's ears, eyes, and nostrils all open on top of the head, so the animal can lie in the water with only those organs showing. In the *Metamynodon,* those parts hadn't yet moved so far up the skull.

Its habits seem to have been much like those of the modern hippo. A hippopotamus comes out at night and wanders around, gobbling everything green it can find. Then it goes back in the lake or river and lies there awash all day, digesting that enormous meal. The *Metamynodon* follows a similar routine. It has tusks, like a hippo's but not so magnificent.

No, it's not related to the hippo, save in the sense that all animals are related. But you'd have to go back to the Paleocene Epoch to find their common ancestor. It's an odd-toed animal, like horses and tapirs; while the hippo is even-toed and related to the pigs. It's a case of what my scientific friends call parallel or convergent evolution.

To get back to the story: None of my sahibs wished to kill the amynodont, but Huang still wanted his photographs. So I sent him and Hofmann ahead to stalk the brute, warning them to go no closer than a hundred meters. I thought that Huang, with his telephoto lens, could get all the pictures he wanted at that distance. I followed.

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We tell the sahibs that we put them in front to give them the first shot. That is true, but it's not the only reason. It's also a fact that every now and then one of these amateur Nimrods trips over a root and stumbles or falls, and if the guide were in front, he might get his bloody head blown off.

"Keep behind me, Cliff," I told Standish. "That bow of yours wouldn't make much impression on a thick-skinned bloke like that."

So I stood, gun ready, as Hofmann and Huang walked toward the amynodont. At about a hundred yards, they stopped for Huang to look through his eyepiece. But then they started advancing again, slowly and stealthily. I wanted to call out a warning to go no further; but to do so would only excite the amynodont. It might run away, in which case Huang would not get his pictures; or it might charge, in which case they would have to rely on Hofmann's rifle, with me as a back-up. Having seen Hofmann shoot, I didn't think I had much to worry about on that score; but I started forward, too, keeping a constant distance behind my clients.

They kept stalking closer and closer. They must have covered another fifty meters, and I was filling my lungs to yell "Stop!" when they halted. The amynodont had quit eating and raised its head suspiciously. I snatched a look through my own glasses. Although I know creatures like that don't have facial expressions, I couldn't help thinking that it was glowering at my clients.

They froze, and after a few seconds the amynodont went back to chewing the leaves off a bush.

Huang raised his camera and began photographing. Whether the motion of his hands or the tiny buzz and click of the camera aroused the amynodont, I don't know. But all of a sudden the animal looked up again, uttered a thunderous snort, champed its jaws—showing a fine set of tusks—and began bounding toward my clients like an animated blimp at racehorse speed.

Huang turned and ran toward me. Hofmann raised his rifle and seemed about to fire, but nothing happened. Then he began looking through the pockets of his safari vest. In the field you need a lot of pockets; but with those bloody things—I wear one, too—there are so many pockets that it takes forever to go through them all. I remembered that Hofmann had emptied his magazine potting alligators, and I didn't recall seeing him reload. Evidently he was looking for more cartridges and not finding them.

"Run!" I yelled.

The amynodont was getting closer when Hofmann looked up, saw the

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beast bearing down on him, and belatedly turned and ran after Huang. Behind him came the amynodont, puffing and galumphing along and gaining with every bound. I hoped it would not catch Hofmann before he got out of a straight line between me and the animal, to give me a clear shot.

Hofmann raced past, and I sighted on the animal's skull. But then the amynodont unexpectedly halted. It stood for several seconds, panting and peering about. Then it calmly turned and waddled back toward the river, to resume its browse on that bush. It must have run out of wind, as those short-legged animals do on a long run.

My mind was snatched back from watching the beast by sounds of a violent quarrel behind me: "You've got my vest!"

"I have not!"

"Let's see it. There, it's got my cartridges!"

"Must have been a mistake when we got dressed—"

"The hell it was! You wanted me killed, to give you another chance at Marta!"

"That's a lie! I never had any such idea—"

The two had a rare old row; got so bloody furious that I was trying to think how to get the rifle and the bow away from them. Standish insisted that he and Hofmann had inadvertently traded safari vests when they dressed. Hofmann thought Standish had done it on purpose, hoping Hofmann would get himself killed, so Standish could court Hofmann's widow, whom he'd been romancing before she married his friend.

I could see a strong argument either way. Standish couldn't have known that Hofmann would shoot off all his magazine at alligators and forget to reload. On the other hand, it was equally unlikely that Standish would put on the vest, with a kilo or two of rounds in its pockets, without noticing the extra weight.

A couple of years later, I still don't know the good oil. Maybe I ought to get in touch with that psychic who told Standish he'd been a barbarian in an earlier life. Of course, if you believe in reincarnation, fifty-odd centuries ago everybody was a barbarian; so that's what you'd have had to be.

Wishing I had the Raja along to handle the situation, I managed to calm those two down enough so that there was no immediate danger of mutual homicide. We spent a couple of bloody unpleasant days at that river camp.

You said something at the start of this interview, about how people thought I ought to have the most fun of anyone in the world at this occupation. Well, at times you can be as happy as a 'possum in a gum

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tree, when everything goes as planned. But that doesn't happen often. And when you have a pair of clients who want to kill each other, it's no bloody fun at all! Not only is there no beak or walloper you can appeal to; but also, how could you convict anyone of a murder committed tens of millions of years ago?

Another thing about hunting these animals, or even just watching and photographing them: It's the nature of the beasts to be thick one day and all gone the next. That's how it was here. Plenty of game the first day, and then the countryside empty; not a beast in sight save a couple of alligator sculling along the river. Then we had a rainy day, which kept us in camp.

By the time we got back to the chamber site, Standish and Hofmann were at least on speaking terms again, though no longer good mates. The first day after our return, I heard a hullabaloo and came out to see. Running into the camp was Pancho, one of Beauregard's crew, holding a bag full of garbage. After him came the second biggest local herbivore, the entelodont of that time, called *Archaeotherium*. It's a relative of the pigs and hippopotami.

If you imagine a buffalo-sized warthog, you'll have the general idea. It doesn't have the tusks curling up outside its mouth, as our warthog does. Instead, it had big canine teeth, like those of the hyaenodon and other carnivores. Like a warthog, it has big, bony bumps on its skull, I suppose to protect it when the boars fight over sows or territory.

Pancho had been dutifully taking a load of garbage away from the camp to bury it. The entelodont must have thought the smell too delicious to pass up and made for the bag with its fangs bared to grab it. Pancho had orders not to feed garbage to the animals, since it might make them more familiar with the camp than we liked. These beasts have no instinctive fear of man, since there weren't any in their time. If you let them get familiar, they come to expect service; and if they don't get it they're likely to take out their resentment with teeth, horns, or hooves.

All Pancho could do was to drop his shovel and race back with the bag, the entelodont one bound behind him. Pancho's a smallish bloke, but he put on a notable turn of speed, as Professor Huang had done with the amynodont. Still, there's nothing like being chased by a prehistoric monster to bring out the best in any runner.

By the time I got there with my rifle, Pancho was just entering the camp, and Clifton Standish was lining up the entelodont in the sights of his bow. Hofmann was just ducking into their tent to grab his gun.

As the entelodont entered the camp, Standish loosed his arrow. For once it didn't miss, but struck with a meaty sound and buried itself in the animal's body between neck and shoulder.

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The entelodont halted and whirled halfway round, looking this way and that to see what had punctured it. As it presented its broadside, Standish gave it another arrow, this time in the ribs. When it whirled about again, he gave it another on the other side.

The entelodont halted, hanging its head. Standish shot another arrow, into the beast's neck. Blood dripped from the animal's muzzle. It turned about and started to walk out of the camp. Outside the boundary it collapsed on the ground, where it lay, kicking in a feeble, uncoordinated way, until it died.

"Ya!" yelled Standish, "Who says I'm not a barbarian?" The silly galah screamed: "*Yeow!*" and pounded his chest with his fist.

"There's your trophy," I told him. "Bear a hand with cutting off and salting the head."

His expression changed. "You mean I've got to get all mucked up with blood and goo?"

"Of course! When did a true barbarian mind a little gore? Come on!"

He came on, though I could see he hated every minute of it. At least he didn't faint or vomit.

After that, things were quiet for the next couple of days. I shot an oreodont for Huang to dissect, getting blood all over himself again. We had to have another session with soap and brush. This was harder, since we had to haul our water from a little local stream.

Before the transition chamber arrived to take us back to Present, there was one more incident. I told you there was a bushy, open stretch on one side of our camp. The last day before the chamber arrived, I was in my tent when Beauregard called:

"Mr. Rivers! Come out; here's suthin' you gotta see!"

My sahibs and I arrived where Beauregard stood almost simultaneously: Huang with his camera, Standish with his bow, and Hofmann and I with our rifles. What Beauregard had called about was a full-grown male *Brontotherium,* ambling across the meadow and eating as it went. It was fully as large as one of the smaller adult elephants and can't have been over fifty meters away.

"There's your other trophy, sports," I said. "Who wants it?"

Standish and Hofmann muttered between themselves, and Hofmann said: "I'll pass. The hyaenodon skin will do me fine. Marta would never let me mount that critter's head in our living room; it wouldn't leave room for people."

"Me neither," said Standish. "The entelodont's enough for me. I suppose Reggie'd want me to help cut it up again?"

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"Bloody right I would," I said.

"Well, anyway, I doubt if my bow would do the job." It was his first admission that his marvelous bow wouldn't kill anything in sight.

At the sound of our voices, the brontothere raised its head and took a couple of steps toward us. Hofmann and I checked our rifles.

Then the brontothere seemed to lose interest. I could imagine what was going on in that primitive little brain. Nothing over there smells good to eat, and those creatures don't look dangerous. Why waste time on them when there's all this lovely edible green stuff?

Of course that's just my imagining. All I can state as a fact is that the brontothere turned away and went back to its herbs. It ate and ate its way across the meadow and then, still eating, disappeared into a copse of trees.

You might say it was an anticlimax to our adventure; but on the whole I was just as glad things turned out as they did, with no homicides or other casualties. The main thing with loonies like Standish is that you can never be sure what they'll do next, so you don't know what precautions to take.

And that's the story of the strangest client I've had, although when I think back I could tell of some who ran Standish a close second and maybe outdid him. The chamber arrived on time; we boarded with our trophies; and Cohen the chamber wallah whisked us back to Present without further complications.

I haven't heard about Frank Hofmann since. Standish did break into the news about a year ago. Seems he married a girl who turned out to be a bit of a tart. A few months later, he caught her in bed with another bloke, whom he promptly strangled to death. He must have been stronger than he looked. He was acquitted at the trial, dumped the dame, and dropped out of sight.

As I said, these safaris can be fun; but more often it's a case of batting down one bloody emergency after another. I've come to hate surprises. And don't forget to send me a copy of this interview when it's printed! ●

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Michael Swanwick
IN CONCERT

Michael Swanwick's brilliant novel, *Stations of the Tide* (*IAsfm*, Mid-December 1990–January 1991), recently won the 1991 Nebula award. After he committed himself to setting his new story in Sevastopol, he discovered the city was the home of the Black Sea Fleet and a military secret. No maps of Sevastopol are available and "foreigners are allowed in only at the heads of large armies." Mr. Swanwick is indebted to Paul Park, Mike N. Korkin, and Andrei Chertkov for helping him get the details right.

art: E.T. Steadman

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The posters had been plastered all over Sevastopol for a month, huge black-and-red things with only two words on them:

IN CONCERT

Nothing else. Just those two words and the harsh profile of a face so familiar to Tex that it sometimes seemed hard-wired into his neural structure, the outward expression of a truth encoded in his genes from birth. Time, place, and price had been omitted so the same posters could be used in every city of the tour. Everybody knew no tickets would ever reach the box office. Favors would be called in, backs scratched, envelopes stuffed with American currency would exchange hands. For weeks, the pasteboards had described complex orbits between the black market and the highest reaches of the Party hierarchy, each one being traded again and again, multiplying in value, greasing the wheels, the perfect bribe, the surest way of getting anything from a new Sony Walkman to a preferred position on the waiting lists for a bigger apartment.

Tonight they would all—tickets, favors, bribes—come to rest.

"Get up, you hooligan!"

Tex squinted up into the face of the squattest, ugliest woman he had ever seen. Shapeless dress, shapeless body, a red babushka from which dry wisps of grey hair struggled to escape. Twin lines from the corners of her mouth framed her chin, giving her the jaws of a turtle. Maybe she was a gnome.

"Hah?" He had been sitting at the bottom of a long flight of public steps, staring idly through the fumes and traffic at a lot across the prospekt. A makeshift market had been built there, where vendors sold vegetables, hot coffee, and flowers from small kiosks. He was working on a song. Trying to come up with a rhyme for "oblivion."

"Don't sprawl like that! Shame on you! Who do you think you are to block everybody's passage?"

The steps rose past the white-walled city offices and though it was not yet quitting time all the apparatchiks had left early to avoid the weekend crush of traffic to their country dachas. The buildings were empty and so were the stairs. Without saying a word, Tex put his guitar back into its case and closed the snaps. Swiping at the seat of his cheap Bulgarian jeans, he stood and smiled at her.

She sniffed and turned away.

The No. 10 trolleybus arrived then, and Tex got on. A couple of people were ahead of him at the punch, so he didn't bother to cancel his ticket. He found a seat near the back and, gripping his guitar case between his knees, stared glumly out a scratched and dirty window, trying to imagine

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himself on stage, electric guitar slung low at the hip, and in the audience girls in punk leather screaming ecstatically. The old woman perversely took the seat beside him, though there were others available. With a lurch and a harsh clatter of gears, the trolleybus started off. A year ago it would have run soundlessly. Next year it might not run at all. Thank you, Comrade Gorbachev.

More posters floated by, singly and in groups. On the blind side of an old warehouse they had been plastered up four-by-three like a video array set to multiply the same static image over and over.

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Somebody had defaced each and every poster with the circle-and-A anarchy symbol.

"Vandals!" The turtle woman jabbed a bony finger in Tex's ribs. "That's a disgusting way to treat the People's property! These hoodlums probably go to the same school as you—why don't you and your friends do something about them? Band together, show some solidarity, teach them respect. Sevastopol is such a beautiful city, after all, don't you agree?"

"Sevastopol is a shithole." Tex turned away from the outraged O of her mouth and stared out the window again. They were going by a park; wrought-iron bandstands, couples out strolling hand in hand. It was very nineteenth-century. He sighed.

He didn't even know why he was bothering.

Both Boris and Andrei had sneered when he asked if they wanted to come along. It was pointless, they said. The little he could hear from outside wasn't going to be worth listening to. Anyway, the Boss was old stuff, little more than a walking cadaver kept alive by cryonics, morphine, and bimonthly whole-blood changes. Three surgeons traveled as part of his road crew and a team of paramedics waited on standby alert backstage whenever he performed.

Then Andrei had said that if Tex wanted to take in some real music, he had the new Butthole Surfers bootleg, which his sister's boyfriend, who worked a Black Sea merchanter, had copped in a greymarket bazaar in Turkey. They could maybe score some hashish from one of the Afghan War vets who hung around the servicemen's club, and go out behind the skating rink and get stoned and drunk and break things.

Tex had replied that he was sick to death of hardcore and that it was just an excuse for no-talents who could scream but couldn't sing to avoid learning how to finger bar chords. That hadn't pleased Boris, who had just settled on the stage name of Misha Cyberpunk and was thinking of

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shaving his head. He'd asked if that meant they were going to work up yet *another* version of "Mustang Sally." At which point Andrei had had to step in to prevent a fight.

So he was going alone.

Worse, his friends had a point. This trip was a perfect example of what his teachers called "the cult of personality" whenever the bastards got onto the subject of their students' taste in music. He was being a jerk. No question about that.

But still. This was more than just another appearance by just another guitar hero. This was more than just another one-night stand by one of the founding fathers of rock and roll. So what if he had to listen from outside the hall? It was the last chance he was ever going to have to get even that close to the man.

It was the Boss's farewell tour.

Forty minutes later the trolleybus let him off at the concert hall.

The Fisherman's Palace of Culture stood above Kamyshovaya Bay, surrounded by gently sloping grass lawns. It was a great four-story square building, all glass and concrete, with seating for two thousand spectators, and half again that many more if they decided to pack the aisles. They could have booked the act into the soccer stadium and filled every seat; but the Boss preferred concert halls. The acoustics were more to his liking.

It was late afternoon. A salt breeze blew up from the water, and he could look down on the fishing craft at anchor in the bay. The lawns were heroically large, muscular Social Realist landscaping intended to proclaim the glory and triumph of the Soviet sod and fertilizer industries. The effect was badly undercut by the line of totalitarian grey highrises across the roadway, concrete monsters identical down to their waterstains. Some of their hard-faced denizens had set up card tables by the parking lot and were offering packs of Winstons and Belgian beer at thirty rubles a can. A surprisingly large number of people were standing casually about the concert hall grounds, trying not to look conspicuous.

A fisherman reclined on the grass, cap on his knee and a brown paper bag in his hand. His trousers were dirty and his sweater torn. "Comrade musician! Come, have a swig." He waggled the bag invitingly.

Tex shrugged and awkwardly sat down beside him. Inside, though, he felt a wonderful warmth. For this one moment, everything was okay. Sitting above the bay, sharing a bottle with a real fisherman, was an authentic experience, an unquestionably cool thing to be doing. He accepted the bottle and drank. The vodka was warm and tasted of fuel oil.

He took too large a mouthful, choked, gasped, and forced a smile. "Good stuff," he said.

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"American!" The fisherman sounded pleased. He held out a hand. "It is good to meet a fine young American boy like you. My name is Yuri."

He took the proffered hand and shook his head. "I've been a citizen for years. My father's a researcher for the Institute of Oceanography." He was sick of the questions everyone asked when they heard his accent and he hated his parents for bringing him here. There were times when even the beatings the kids back in Austin gave him for being a Commie pinko creep would be a small price to pay if he could return home. He wasn't treated all that much better here anyway. "The guys at school call me Tex."

He managed to make it sound as if they'd never meant it as an insult.

Yuri grinned broadly, showing steel teeth and hideous gums. "Play some music. Something romantic, maybe it will draw in some pretty girls."

"Uh, well . . . " He unlatched the case, drew out the guitar, began tuning his strings. "Actually, I'm not as good as I'd like to be. I've got this band together," presuming that Andrei and good old Misha Cyberpunk hadn't disbanded Chernobyl in his absence, "but it's hard to find a place to practice." He strummed a C chord, shifted to an F and then a B. Finally he settled on a slow version he'd worked up of "I am the Walrus," singing the words in English and crooning the "yellow matter custard" line with exaggerated sweetness.

"You are another Vladimir Vysotsky," the fisherman said admiringly. A couple of art students—the boy was dressed in black and had dyed his hair an unnatural red—wandered within range of Yuri's bellow, and he waved them over. "Comrade artists! Come join us, have a swig!"

"You know why I'm here?" Yuri asked two hours later. The No. 7 bus had just pulled up to the front of the hall, and the latest load of ticketholders were getting off. They were chatting happily, eagerly, the pampered offspring of Party officials, most of them, with a few low-ranking Red Army or Black Sea Fleet officers scattered here and there for flavoring. Many were vacationers from the bathing resorts, dressed in Benetton fashions. They pooled and flowed elegantly up the twin stairways to the second floor entrance. In addition to the art students, Yuri had drawn in a young grocery clerk, a locksmith, and a scruffy blond girl who said she was a truck driver, though nobody believed her. "Do you know why?"

Smiling, they shook their heads.

"I am here because of *them*. All those guys walking up the steps into the Fisherman's Palace of Culture. I thought, how embarrassed they must be at not having a single fisherman in the Fisherman's Palace. So here I am. You're welcome!" he shouted to a cluster of apparatchiks climbing out of their Mercedes.

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They pointedly ignored him.

"Ahh, I love those bastards, and they know it."

"You may be here," said the redheaded art student, "but you couldn't get inside that building tonight to save your life."

"Who said that?" Yuri sat up straight and stared around him incredulously. "Of course I could get in. There is always a way in for a man like me."

The student laughed uneasily, like someone who is trying to be pleasant but is not sure he understands the joke.

"You don't believe me? I'll show you. I'll get in and I'll get all of you in with me." He lurched to his feet. "Come on, it's my treat!"

"This is crazy," Tex said. They had circled the building three times, trying all the side doors and sizing up security—very tight—at the loading dock out back where the equipment trucks were parked. Now they were back at the first door they had checked.

"It couldn't hurt to try." Yuri knocked. Nothing happened. He tried again, louder. Still nothing. Balling his hand into a fist he pounded at the door until it echoed and boomed.

After a minute, the door opened slightly. A beefy militiaman stood within, a big moustache all but hiding his mouth. "What do you want?" He glared at them. Tex could see he was holding the door from the inside so it couldn't be grabbed away from him. Yuri smiled ingratiatingly and said, "Comrade! Look at us. I have the honor to be an honest fisherman. My friend here"—he nodded at Tex—"is a factory worker and himself a talented musician. This young man in black is a student who spent the last harvest digging potatoes on a co-operative. This fine young woman—"

The guard started to close the door, and Yuri grabbed at the edge.

"Listen to me! We are the Masses, we are the People, we are the Revolution! Those well-dressed people in there"—he pointed scornfully—"who are they? The privileged class, I say this not angrily but in sad truth. Why are they inside and we without? This is a betrayal of the principles of—"

"Fifty dollars American," said the militiaman, "and I'll let six of you in. No more. If you get the money together come back to this door and knock."

He slammed it in their faces.

But when they pooled their resources it turned out they were all of them paupers. All together they had only eight–nine rubles and three American singles. "Anyway," the grocer grumbled, "even if we had the rubles, where would we find somebody with the hard currency to sell?"

The locksmith glanced significantly at the scragggly line of card tables by the lot but said nothing.

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"Don't be downcast," Yuri said. He gathered the paper notes together, arranging them in his fist so they made an untidy mass with the greenbacks on the outside. "Looks pretty good, eh? I'll wave these in fatso's face, and when he makes a grab at them, Tex will yank open the door and we'll all push forward. We'll overwhelm the little prick."

They went back to the door. "I can't believe we're doing this." The female art student hugged herself and shivered.

Yuri raised a hand. "Are we all in place? Tex—stand right there, be ready for action."

Tex positioned himself, setting his guitar case by his feet to free his hands. Their little group was drawing attention now. Three or four loiterers joined them to see what was up. Yuri banged on the door. "Hey in there! Get off your thumb and open up!"

The door opened a cautious crack. "Let me count—" the militiaman said suspiciously, and *"Now!"* Yuri shouted.

Eight hands seized the door, and it flew open with a crash. Scooping up his guitar, Tex joined the others as they surged forward. The guard fell back in angry astonishment, pulling a truncheon from his belt.

All was confusion. Tex was running wildly down the hallway when a sudden *crack* made him turn his head. Yuri was sinking to his knees, face a glistening red. Drops of blood flew from the billy club. It was paralyzing, unbelievable. Tex stopped, the art students flashing by hand in hand, and stared.

"Run!" Yuri gasped.

Then the fat militiaman was coming directly toward him, with an expression so cold and violent that Tex panicked. He fled blindly, guitar case knocking against his side. What am I doing here? he wondered. He no longer had the slightest interest in seeing the show.

He pushed through a crowded corridor. People were running, shouting, struggling. There was a militiaman kneeling atop the little truck driver's chest. She was trying to bite his arm. Tex turned a corner, ran up a concrete and steel stairway. Heavy footsteps pounded behind him.

He ran like the wind, through corridors and empty rehearsal halls, without shaking his pursuer. His mind was blank with fear. He was hopelessly lost.

The militiaman caught up to Tex in the doorway of a dressing room and knocked him to the ground. The guitar case skittered away. A boot smashed into his ribs, and in the sudden crystalline clarity of the pain, he found himself looking up into the goateed face of a man who had swiveled in his seat from a makeup mirror to see what the fuss was about. It was a heartbreakingly familiar face.

It was the Boss himself—Vladimir Ilyich Ulyanov, idol of millions, the man known to his countless fans as Nikolai Lenin.

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In that agonized instant there was time enough to take in everything and yet no time in which to act. He saw Lenin's calm, dispassionate face looking thoughtfully down at him, and heard the sadistic chuckle of the guard as he reached down to grab Tex's collar. He saw the knickknacks on the dresser top, a framed autographed picture of Karl Marx holding his saxophone, a silver hairbrush, a pack of Salems. Half sunk in shadow, the objects seemed freighted with awful significance.

Lenin watched silently as the militiaman hauled Tex up and smashed him in the face with his brutal fist. Tex felt a wondering sense of betrayal and then he was slammed against the cinder-block wall and his vision whited out.

When sight returned, he saw the guard raising a booted foot over his guitar case.

"No!" he croaked. "Not my axe!"

For the first time, a spark of interest animated Lenin's face. He raised an index finger and the militiaman froze, foot in air.

"So," Lenin said, "A fellow musician?"

Tex nodded warily.

"Sit down." Lenin gestured to a chair, and Tex collapsed into it. His body felt bruised, aching, ugly.

"My friends . . . "

"You can do nothing for them." The militiaman, Tex noted, had not left but merely drawn back against the wall where he stood, arms folded, watching everything with avid eye.

Lenin stood, walked over to the guitar case, and brought it back to his chair. Resting it across his knees, he undid the snaps. "A Martin." He held it up, admiring its shape and heft. "Not bad, for an acoustic. How did you come by it?"

"I brought it with me from Austin."

Tex waited for the usual questions, but Lenin surprised him by merely remarking, "You should paint the front like the Lone Star flag. It would be good theatre." He ran a thumb over the strings, coaxing a sigh from its twelve-stringed throat. "You like it here in Sevastopol?"

"Sevastopol is—" He stopped. "It's a beautiful city. But I miss Texas."

An inattentive nod. Lenin put the Martin down. "What kind of music do you play? Thrash, reggae, acid house?"

"No way! I only play good ol' rock and roll."

Lenin snorted. "Rock is dead. The bloodsuckers and moneymakers have drained it dry. There's nothing left but the carcass. Word just hasn't gotten out to the street yet." He was silent for a long moment. "There was real excitement to it in the old days. It was raw, it was impolite, it was everything your parents hated. It said to them: You cannot control

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us. You can't lock us in, hold us back, keep us down. We're free and we know it and there's nothing you can do about it. The future is ours.

"Now? Pfaugh! It's been bought and sold, homogenized, pasteurized, processed and packaged, like so many waxed-paper cartons of yogurt."

"But not your music," Tex said eagerly. "Your music is—"

"Look at me!" Lenin slammed his fists on the dresser. Shocked, Tex for the first time actually looked at him critically, and saw how haggard his appearance was. There were purple circles under his eyes, and the skin hung loose and white and dry from his skull. He was more corpse than man. "I'm a fucking zombie. I've been on the road so long I can't remember anything else. Doesn't it seem to you that there's something obscene about a man my age strutting and posturing on stage, acting out juvenile fantasies of power and rebelliousness? It's a farce. It's—"

An officious little man with a clipboard stuck his head in the door and barked, "Fifteen minutes."

"Yes, yes." The life went out of Lenin's face. Wearily, he picked up a makeup brush. His eyes lifted to the glass and met Tex's in the reflection.

"Take him out," Lenin said. His face was a mask. In the mirror, the fat militiaman smiled. A cold sizzle ran up Tex's side as he realized that anything could happen to him now. One word from Lenin, and he would be led to the basement and beaten to death. No one would ever know. The Boss stared at him for a long time, enigmatic, unreadable. Then, as if he had just now come to a decision, he added, "Give him a seat in the hall."

Tex found himself dazedly sitting third row center as the roadies slouched about the stage, hooking together the amps and running sound checks. Without fanfare the band came on, one by one, and picked up their instruments. Ignoring the applause, they tightened snares, checked the tuning of their guitars, slid a finger up and down the keyboard. Familiar faces all, but nameless. Somebody threw a spot on the empty mike at the center of the stage. The Boss did not appear.

The audience began to clap in rhythm. "Len-in, Len-in, Len-in!" they chanted. The noise filled the hall, pounding, urgent, desperate, and climaxed in an explosion of screams and cheers when a sudden spotlight alerted them to curtains parting to stage left.

Lenin.

He strode briskly, almost angrily, on stage, while the applause went on and on and on. Light bounced from the shiny tips of his shoes. The crease in his grey trousers was sharp as a knife. When he reached the center of the stage a roadie scuttled up to hand him his Stratocaster and a second patched in the jack. They faded quickly back as, looping the guitar strap over his head, he stood up to the mike. The audience was still applauding madly.

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He held up a hand for quiet.

The crowd hushed. He cleared his throat. The stage lights brought out the circles under his eyes, the gaunt appearance, the fatigue lying just under the skin. In an unaccented, emotionless voice, he said, "The Workers Control the Means of Production," then turned to give the band the downbeat.

The band was a little ragged on the first number. The applause at its conclusion was loud but not really enthusiastic, more dutiful than heartfelt. Lenin stared down at his shoes, then up again and said, "Religion is the Opiate of the Masses," He struck a chord.

Listening, Tex experienced a dismay so complete that he could feel it down in the soles of his feet. Again, the music was uninspired. There was nothing fresh there; it was all the same chops, the same licks, the same words delivered with exactly the same phrasing as they had been seventy–eighty–ninety years ago when Lenin was young and the songs were new, and people still believed that rock and roll could change the world. All the energy, all the significance was gone, transformed to mere nostalgia.

And so it went, for song after song.

This was horrible. One side of his face was swelling up, and Tex wanted to cry. If he hadn't been given so prominent a seat, he would have stood up and slipped away—he could hear a faint rustling off to the edges of the crowd that might be people doing just that. But it would be too noticeable if he left. It would be a slap in the Boss's face.

He had no choice but to stick it out.

Tex glanced to either side of him. The naval officer to his right was looking down at his watch. A moon-faced girl to his other side looked puzzled, like there was something wrong but she didn't think herself smart enough to understand what. He wondered what had become of Yuri and his other friends from the assault on the door. Their sufferings seemed grotesquely wasted now.

But gradually then an odd thing began to happen. With each number, Lenin seemed to gain strength from the crowd, energy from their gathering enthusiasm, power from their applause. The band pulled together behind him. The music got tighter.

Midway through "Rural Electrification," it all came together. The band went into the break, organ soaring and bass like thunder. They were really cooking now. With sudden vigor, Lenin shucked out of his grey jacket and stood in shirt and vest.

A roadie materialized from the gloom to take away the jacket, but the guitarist ignored him. He ran to the edge of the stage and held the jacket out at arm's length, above the waving, grasping hands, and began to

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tease the fans. He dipped it down almost within their reach, then yanked it back again, and danced to center stage.

Again Lenin dangled the jacket, his eyes flashing with dark amusement. And though Tex knew it was an illusion, that with the lights in his eyes Lenin couldn't distinguish one audience member from another, he felt an electric spark of contact. He leaped for the jacket, as mad as any of them to snatch the prize.

Suddenly Lenin jerked back. He whirled the jacket around his head three times, then skimmed it out into the crowd. While those nearest to where it came down fought frenziedly for a scrap, he snatched up his guitar again and, spontaneously abandoning the song midway through, shouted, "Red October!"

It was one of his best numbers, a real rabble-rouser, and the first chords brought all the auditorium to their feet.

How long that number lasted, no one could say. He stretched it out, working changes and playing variants no other musician would even have attempted. He wrung every last drop of sweat there was to be had from it. He drove his listeners wild.

Then, without pausing, he segued into his signature anthem, "Workers of the World, Unite!"

The audience *roared*. They were standing on their chairs now, clapping their hands over their heads, dancing in the aisles. And when he came to the chorus, everyone joined in, without exception, all voices raised to sing along, one voice, united:

You have nothing to lose!
You have nothing to lose!
You have nothing to lose . . .
But your chains.

The guitars soared and snarled. The drummer was going crazy. The noise was thunderous, the stressed-concrete roof billowed outward into the starry night to make room for it, and still it grew. Tex was jumping—jumping!—up and down atop his chair, wild with joy, ecstatic, singing along. Caught up in the music, for the first time since leaving Austin he felt not alone, but among friends. A great wave of solidarity took the crowd and made them all one, united, a part of something great.

You have nothing to lose . .
But your chains.

Now people were linking arms, Red Army with Black Sea Fleet, doctors with bureaucrats with factory workers, forming chains that stretched clear across the hall, swaying in time to the music and singing along. Up in the balcony too, everybody was singing, so great a flood of song that the Boss's voice was lost in it. Tears were rolling down Tex's cheeks. He felt such a joy as would be impossible to describe. They were all, every one of them, brave and selfless and free. They were all one.

It could have gone on forever. ●

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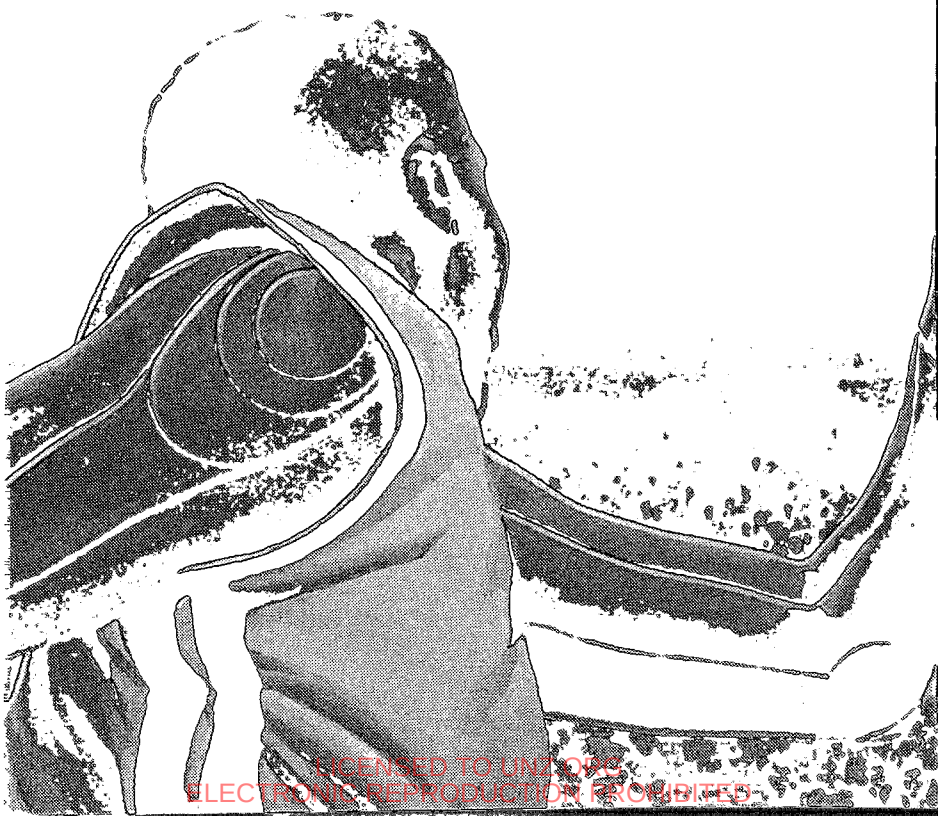
Jonathan Lethem

VANILLA DUNK

The author's last tale for *IAsfm*, "The Happy Man" (February 1991)—a deeply disturbing and powerfully written tale of child abuse—was a finalist for the 1991 Nebula award for best novelette. Since then, Mr. Lethem has sold stories to *Interzone*, *Universe 2*, *Pulphouse*, and *The Year's Best SF, Eighth Annual Edition*. His highflying new tale takes a fast-breaking look at the future of basketball.

art: John Johnson



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Elwood Fossett and I were in a hotel room in Portland, after dropping a meaningless game to the Sony Trail Blazers—we'd already made the playoffs—when the lottery came on the television, the one where they gave away the Michael Jordan subroutines.

The lottery, ironically, was happening back in our home arena, the Garden, while we were on the road. It was an absurd spectacle, the place full of partisan fans rooting for their team's rookie to draw the Jordan skills, the rookies all sitting sheepishly with their families and agents, waiting. The press scurried around like wingless mosquitoes.

"Yo, Lassner, check it out," said Elwood, tapping the screen with his long black club of a finger. "We gonna get you and McFront some company."

He meant the white kid in the Gulf and Western Knicks jersey, stranded with his parents in that sea of black faces. Michael Front—"McFront" to the black players—and I were the two white players on the Knicks.

"Not too likely," I said. "He won't make the team unless he draws the Jordan."

Elwood sat back down on the end of the bed. "Nobody else we'd take?"

"Nope." There were, of course, six other sets of skills available that night—Tim Hardaway, if I remember correctly, and Karl Malone—but none with the potential impact of Jordan's. In a league where everyone played with the skills of one star or another, it took a Jordan to get people's attention. As for the little white rookie, he could have been anyone. It didn't matter who you drafted anymore. What mattered was what skills they picked up in the lottery. Which star's moves would be lifted out of the archives and plugged into the rookie's exosuit. More specifically, what mattered tonight was that the Michael Jordan skills were up for grabs. It was fifteen years since Jordan's retirement, so the required waiting period was over.

The Jordan skills were just about the last, too. The supply of old NBA stars was pretty much depleted. It was only a couple of years after Jordan retired that the exosuits took over, and basketball stopped growing, started feeding on itself instead, becoming a kind of live 3D highlights film, a chance to see all the dream teams and matchups that had never actually happened; Bird feeding passes to Earl the Pearl, Wilt Chamberlin going one on one with Ewing, Bill Walton and Marques Johnson playing out their careers instead of being felled by injuries, Earl Maginault and Connie Hawkins bringing their legendary schoolyard games to the pros, seeing if they could make it against the best.

Only a few of the genuine stars had retired later than Jordan; after that they'd have to think up something new. Start playing real basketball again, maybe. Or just go back to the beginning of the list of stars and start over.

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"Nobody for real this year?" asked Elwood. He counted on me to read the sports papers.

"I don't think so. I heard the kid for the Sixers can play, actually. But not good enough to go without skills." Mixed in among us sampled stars were a handful of players making it on their own, without exosuits: Willard Daynight, Barry Porush, Tony Smerks, Marvin Franklin. These were the guys who would have been the Magic Johnsons, Walt Fraziers, and Charles Barkleys of our era, and in a way they were the guys I felt sorriest for. Instead of playing in a league full of average guys and being big stars, the way they would have in the past, they were forced to go up against the sampled skills of the Basketball Hall of Fame every night. Younger fans probably got mixed up and credited *their* great plays to some sampled program, instead of realizing they were seeing the real thing.

The lottery started with the tall black kid with the Pan Am Nuggets drawing the David Robinson skills package. It was a formality, a foregone conclusion, since he was the only rookie tall enough to make use of a center's skills. The kid stepped up to the mike and thanked his management and his representation and, almost as an afterthought, his mom and dad, and everyone smiled and flashed bulbs for a minute or two. You could see that the Nuggets general manager had his mind on other things. The Pan Am team was one of the worst in the league at that point, and as a result they had another lottery spot out of the seven, a lean, well-muscled kid who could play with the Jordan skills if he drew them. If they came up with Robinson and Jordan the Nuggets could be a force in the league overnight.

Personally, I always winced when a talented seven-footer like Robinson was reincarnated into the league. Center was my position, and I already spent most games riding the bench. Sal Pharoah, the Knicks' regular center, played with the skills of Moses Malone, one of the best ever, and a workhorse who didn't like to sit.

Elwood read me like a book. "You're sweatin', Lassner. You afraid the Nuggets gonna trade their center now they got Robinson?"

"Fuck you, Elwood." The Nuggets' old center played with the skills of a guy named Wes Unseld. Not a superstar, not in this league, but better than me.

I played with Ralph Sampson's skills—sort of. Sampson was briefly a star in his time, mostly because of his height, and as centers go he was pretty passive, not all that dominant in the paint. He was too gentle, and up against the sampled skills of Abdul-Jabbar, Ewing, Walton, Olajuwon, Chamberlin, and all the other great centers we faced every night, he and I were pretty damned ineffective.

The reason I say I only sort of played with the Sampson skills is

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that, lacking the ability to dominate inside, when I actually got on the floor—usually in the junk minutes toward the end of a game—I leaned pretty heavily on an outside jumpshot. It's a ridiculous shot for a center, but hey, it was what I had to offer. And my dirty little secret was that Bo Lassner's own jumpshot was just a little better than Ralph Sampson's. So when I took it I switched my exosuit off. The sportswriters didn't know, and neither did Coach Van.

"Relax, fool," said Elwood. "You ain't never gonna get traded. You got skin insurance." He reached over and pinched my thigh.

"Ouch!"

They gave away the Hardaway subroutines, to a skinny little guy with the Coors Suns. His smile showed his disappointment. It was down to four rookies now, and the Jordan skills were still unclaimed. Our kid—they flashed his name, Alan Gornan, under the picture—was still in the running.

"Shit," said Elwood. "Jordan's moves are too funky for a white cat, man. They program his suit it's gonna break his hips."

"You were pretty into Michael Jordan growing up, weren't you?" I asked. Elwood grew up in a Chicago slum.

"You got that," he said. His eyes were fixed on the screen.

"He won't get it," I said. "There's three other teams." What I meant, though I didn't say it, was that there were three other black guys still in the draw. I had a funny feeling Elwood didn't want our rookie to pick up the Jordan moves. I could think of a couple of different reasons for that.

The Karl Malone skills went to the kid from the I.G. Farben 76ers. Down to three. Then they took a break for commercials. Elwood was suddenly pacing the room. I called the desk and had them bring us up a couple of beers, out of mercy.

The Nuggets' second man picked up Adrian Dantley, leaving it down to two rookies, for two teams: us and the Beatrice Jazz. I was suddenly caught up in the excitement, my contempt for the media circus put aside for the moment.

We watched the commissioner punch up the number on his terminal, look up, and sigh. His mouth hung open and the crowd fell silent, so that for a second I thought the sound on the hotel television had died.

"Jazz, second pick."

That was it. Alan Gornan, and the Knicks, had the rights to the Jordan skills. The poor kid from the Jazz, who looked like a panther, had just landed the skills of Chris Mullin, undeniably a great shooter, a top-rank star, but just as undeniably slow, flat-footed, and white. It was a silly twist, but hey—it's a silly game.

The media swarmed around Gornan and his parents. Martin Fishall,

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the Knicks GM, thrust himself between the rookie and the newsmen and began answering questions, a huge grin on his face. I thought to look over at Elwood. He hated Fishall. He had his head tossed back, and he was chugging his beer.

The camera closed in on a headshot of Alan Gornan. He looked pretty self-possessed. He wore a little diamond earring and his eyes already knew how to find the camera and play to it.

They shoved a microphone in his face. "Got anything you want to say, kid?"

"Yeah." He grinned, and brushed the hair out of his eyes. Charisma.

"Go ahead. You're live."

"Look out, New York," said Alan Gornan. "Clear the runway. Vanilla Dunk is due for takeoff." The line started out a little underplayed, almost shy, but by the time he had the whole thing out he had a sneer on his face that reminded me of nothing, I swear, so much as pictures I've seen of the young Elvis Presley.

"Vanilla Dunk?" I said aloud, involuntarily.

"Turn that shit off," said Elwood, and I did.

That was the last of Alan Gornan for the moment. The new players weren't eligible until next season. All bravado aside, it would take Gornan a few months of working with the Knicks' programming experts to get control of the Jordan skills. In the meantime, we were knocked out of the playoffs in the semifinal round by the Hyundai Celtics. It should have been a great series—and we should have won it, I think—but Otis Pettingale, our star guard, who carried Nate Archibald's skills, twisted his ankle in the first game and had to sit, and the series was just a bummer.

I spent that off-season mostly brooding, as I remember. Ringing my ex-wife's answering machine, watching TV, fun stuff like that, mostly. Plus practicing my jumpshot. Silly me. If I'd only been six inches shorter I could have been a big star . . . that's a joke, son.

Training camp was a media zoo. Was Otis Pettingale too old to carry the load for another season? What about the Sal Pharoah trade rumors? And how were they going to fit Alan Gornan in, anyway? Who would sit to make room for the kid with the Jordan skills—Michael Front, who played with Kevin McHale's skills, or Elwood Fossett, who played with Maurice Lucas's? The reporters circled the camp like hungry wolves, putting everyone in a bad mood. They kept trying to bait us into second-guessing Coach Van on the makeup of the starting five, kept wanting to know what we thought of Gornan, who we'd barely even met.

And they all wanted a piece of Gornan. Martin Fishall and Coach Van kept him insulated at first, but it became clear pretty fast that he knew

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how to handle himself, and that he actually liked talking to the press. He had a knack for playing the bad boy, and with no effort at all he had them eating his "Vanilla Dunk" bullshit for breakfast, lunch, and dinner.

At practices he more or less behaved himself. The Jordan skills were pretty dynamic, and Gornan was smart enough to know how to work them into the style of the rest of the team. It was a little scary, actually, seeing how fast something new and different was coming into being. The Knicks' core had been solid for a couple of years—but of course the Jordan skills weren't going to sit on the bench.

Gornan was initially polite with me, which was fine. But nothing more developed, and by the third week of camp what had passed for politeness was seeming a little more like arrogance. I got the feeling it was the same way with Otis and McFront. He seemed to have won a friend in Sal Pharoah, though, for no apparent reason. We played a lot of split-squad games, which meant I got to start at center for the B-team. As such it was my job to clog up the middle and keep Gornan from driving, and I got a quick taste of what the other teams were going to be facing this year, with Pharoah playing the muscle, setting picks, clearing the lanes for the kid's drives. It was a bruising experience, to put it mildly.

One afternoon after one of those split-squad events I found myself in the dressing room with Pharoah and Elwood.

"You like protecting that fucker," said Elwood. "Why don't you let him take his licks?"

Pharoah smirked. He and Elwood were the two intimidators on our team, and when they went head to head neither had any edge. "It's not about that, Elwood," he said.

"He thinks he's fucking Michael Jordan," said Elwood.

"As far as the team's concerned, he is Michael Jordan," said Pharoah. "Just like I'm Moses Malone, and your stupid ass is Maurice Lucas."

"That white boy's gonna ruin this team, Sal."

Pharoah shook his head. "Different team now, man. Figure it out, Elwood. Stop looking back." He wadded up his sweaty shorts and tossed them into the bottom of a locker, then headed for the showers.

"What was that shit?" Elwood snapped at me, the minute Pharoah was out of earshot. " 'Figure it out.' Is he trying to tell me I'm not making the cut?"

"Don't be stupid," I said. "You're in. McFront'll sit."

"White boys don't sit. 'Less they suck as bad as you."

"I think you're wrong. Don't you see? With Gornan they've got their token white starter. You're a better player than McFront." What I was saying, of course, was that the Maurice Lucas skills were more valuable than the Kevin McHale skills. Which was true, but it didn't take team chemistry into account.

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"Two white forwards," he said. "They won't be able to fucking resist."

"Wrong. You and Pharoah both in there to protect Gornan. All that muscle to surround the Jordan skills. That's what they won't be able to resist."

"Huh." He considered my logic. "Shit, Lassner."

"What?"

"Shit," he said. "I smell shit around here."

At the start of the season Coach Van played Gornan very conservatively, off the bench. He was a rookie, and we were a very solid team, so it was justifiable. But not for long. When he got in he was averaging more points per minute than Elwood or McFront, and they were points that counted, that won games. He was a little shaky on defense, but the offensive impact of the Jordan subroutines was astonishing, and Gornan was meshing well with Sal Pharoah, just like in the practices. Otis Pettingale's offense at guard was fading a bit, but we had plenty of other weapons. Our other guard was Derrick Flash, who with Maurice Cheeks' skills was just coming into his own. We reeled off six wins in a row at the start of the season before taking a loss, to the Hyundai Celtics, on a night where Gornan didn't see many minutes. That was the night the chanting started, midway through the third quarter: "Vanilla Dunk! Vanilla Dunk! Vanilla Dunk . . . "

The next night he started, and scored forty-three points, in a game we won easily. He was a starter after that. McFront was benched, which broke the heart of his fanclub, but the sports pages agreed that Elwood belonged on the floor, and most of them thought we were the team to beat. We should have been.

The trouble started one night when we were beating—no, make that thrashing—the Disney Heat, 65 to 44, at the start of the third quarter. I was in, actually. I guess Gornan had been working overtime with the programming guys, and he hauled out a slamdunk move all of a sudden, one where he floated up over three of the Disney players, switched the ball from his right to his left hand, and flipped it in as he fell away. It was a nice move—make that an astonishing move—but it wasn't strictly necessary, given the situation.

No big deal. But a minute later he did it again. Actually this time he soared under the basket and dropped it in backward. As we jogged back on defense I heard Elwood muttering to himself. The Disney player tossed up a brick and I came up with the rebound, and when I looked upcourt there was Gornan again, all alone, signaling for the pass.

I ignored him—we were up more than twenty points—and fed it in slow to Otis. Otis dribbled up a few feet, let the Disney defender catch up with Gornan, and we put a different play together.

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Next time the ball got into Gornan's hands he broke loose with it, and went up to dunk. The crowd there in Miami, having nothing better to do, started cheering for us to pass it to him. Elwood's mood darkened. He began trying to run the team in Otis's place, trying to set up plays that locked Gornan out of the action. I could feel the resistance—like being part of a machine where the gears suddenly start grinding.

Coach Van pulled me out of the game. From the bench I had a clearer sense of how much Gornan was milking this crowd, and of how much they were begging to be milked. He was giving them Michael Jordan, the legend they'd never seen themselves, the instant replay man, the one who stood out even in a field of stars. And the awful thing about Gornan's theatrics was that they worked, as basketball. We were up almost thirty points now. He'd reduced the Disney team to spectators.

A minute later Elwood joined me on the bench, and McFront went in. Elwood put a towel over his head and then lowered his head almost below his big knees. The bench got real quiet, which meant the noise from the crowd stood out even better.

Elwood toweled off his head and stood up suddenly, like he was putting himself back in. He turned and looked at me and over at Coach Van. Then he spat, just over the line and onto the court, and turned and walked toward the locker room.

Coach Van jerked his thumb at me, meaning I should go play therapist. I guess my contribution wasn't sorely needed on the court. Sometimes I wondered if they kept me around because I knew how to talk to Elwood.

I found him dressing up in his street clothes, without having showered. When he looked up at me I almost turned and ran back to the bench. I held up my hands, pleading not guilty. But of course the skin on those hands was white.

"You see that shit out there," he said. It was a command that I nod, not a question. "That's poor taste, man."

"Poor taste?"

"That dunk is from the third game of the '91 finals, Lassner. That's sacrilege, hauling it out for no reason, against these Disney chumps."

"You *recognize* the dunk?"

" 'Course I recognize the dunk. You never watch any Jordan tapes, man? That dunk is a *prayer*. He can't just—"

"Whoa, Elwood. Hold on a minute. You're sampling, I'm sampling. This isn't some purist thing here, man. Get some perspective."

"Michael Jordan, Lassner. You ever see the tape of Michael crying after winning in '91?"

"At least he's on our team. Jeez, what would happen if you had to play *against* the almighty Jordan, or somebody with his skills—you'd probably fold up completely!"

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"It's not just the dunks, Lassner. He won't play defense. He's always up the court cherry-picking, waiting for the easy pass. Michael was a great defensive player!"

"C'mon, Elwood. This is a showtime league and you know it. You're one of about five guys playing serious defense. *Everybody* goes for the fancy moves. That's what the sampling is all about. He's just better than most, because he's got the hot skills package. *Somebody* had to get the Jordan skills."

"It didn't have to be some little white jerk."

Once it was out it was kind of a relief. Black and white was the issue. Of course. As much as that was supposed to be a thing of the past. I'd known all along, but in some stupid way I guess I'd thought not saying anything might make it better.

"I'm a white guy with a black guy's skills," I pointed out.

He waved it aside. "Not important. It's not Jordan. You play white, anyway."

What was it about basketball that made it all seem so stark? As though it were designed as a metaphor—the white style of play so plodding and corporate and reliable, the black style so individual and expressive and so often self-destructive, so "me-against-the-world." When a black guy couldn't jump they said he had "white legs," or if he was slow it was "white man's disease." Basketball was a white sport that blacks had taken over and yet the audience was still pretty much white. And that white audience adored the black players for their brilliant moves—thanks to sampling that adoration would probably kill the sport—and yet was still thought to require the token white face, for purposes of "identification."

Solve basketball, I sometimes thought, and you'd solve everything.

"Okay," I said. "He's a jerk. But '*white* jerk' shouldn't matter. Jordan wasn't a black separatist, as I remember. I mean, call me naïve, but scrambling the racial stuff up was supposed to be one of the few good things about this sampling deal, right?"

"Michael's career meant something," Elwood mumbled. "Should be treated with respect."

"Look who turns out to be Mr. Historical," I said. "You gotta get hip, Elwood. Basketball is Postmodern now."

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"Means Michael's career might have meant something, but yours doesn't, and neither does 'Vanilla Dunk's'—so relax."

Once Gornan started hauling out the realtime poster shots the media wouldn't let it go. He was all over the sports channels, dunking in slow-mo, grinning and pumping his fists. He made the cover of *Rolling Stone*,

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diamond earring flashing, spinning a basketball with one hand, groping a babe with the other. Then his agent started connecting with the endorsement people, and you couldn't turn on the tube without seeing Vanilla Dunk downing vitaburgers at McDonald's, Vanilla Dunk slurping on a Pepsi or a Fazz, Vanilla Dunk checking out the synthetic upholstery inside a new Chrysler SunFrame.

With Gornan playing the exuberant Michael Jordan game and Elwood playing angry we kept on winning. In fact we opened up a sizeable lead over the Celtics in the division, and it wasn't necessarily a good thing. Being too far ahead was almost as bad as floundering in the basement of the division. Without the tension of a tight race to bind us together as a team all the egos came rushing to the forefront. Otis was struggling with accepting his fading powers and diminished role, and we all missed the way his easy confidence had been at the heart of the team. McFront was sulking on the bench. Pharoah was playing hard, trying to make the new team work, trying to show by force that Gornan fit in. Meanwhile Gornan's theatrics got more and more outrageous, and every slam dunk was another blow to the dam holding back Elwood's rage.

One afternoon in Oakland before a game with the IBM Warriors someone made the mistake of leaving the TV on in the visitors' clubhouse. Elwood and Otis and I were sitting playing cards when a pre-taped interview with Gornan turned up on the sports channel.

Somewhat surprisingly, the interviewer seemed to be trying to work around to the subject of race. "How'd you choose your nickname, Dunk? Why Vanilla, in particular? What point are you trying to make?"

Gornan shrugged. "Hey, don't get heavy," he said. "They call me Vanilla 'cause I'm completely smooth and completely sweet. It's simple."

"Why not something else, then?" said the interviewer. "Chocolate, say."

Gornan laughed, and for a minute I thought he was going to grant the man his point. Instead he realigned his sneer and said: "Chocolate don't go down smooth."

"What are you saying, Dunk?"

"Nothing, man. Just that I'm not chocolate. That's why I'm like a breath of fresh air—I go down smooth. People are ready for that, ready to lighten up. Chocolate's sweet, but it's always got that bitter edge, y'know?"

And then, God help me, he turned to the camera and gave it a big wink.

I got up and shut the TV off, but it was too late. Elwood had already slammed his cards down on the table and stalked out. Otis looked sick. I prayed that Gornan wasn't in the locker room. I went through and

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found Elwood out on the edge of the floor, watching the Warriors take their warmups.

At game time we managed to get out on the floor without any explosions. But from the opening tipoff I knew it was going to be a bad night. When the ball got into Elwood's hands he drove like a steamroller up the middle and went up for a vicious dunk. Then he stole an inbound pass and did it again, only this time he fouled his man on the drive. Everyone on the floor looked nervous, even the Warriors—even, for once, Gornan, who was usually oblivious.

The Warrior hit his free throws and the game resumed. The pattern came clear soon enough: Elwood was calling for every pass, and when he got it he was going up for the dunk, every time. He was trying to play Gornan's game, but he was too big and strong, too angry to pull it off. He was stuffing a lot of shots but he'd accumulated four fouls before the second quarter. When Coach Van finally pulled him he had twice as many points as Gornan or anyone else, but the Warriors were ahead.

He sat until halftime, and with McFront in we got the game tied. During the break Coach Van called Elwood into an office and closed the door. Meanwhile Gornan was off in his usual corner of the locker room smoking a cigarette, but he had a hollow, haunted expression on him, one I'd never seen before.

Elwood was back in for the start of the third quarter, and whatever Coach Van had said to him in his office hadn't worked: he picked up right where he'd left off, breaking for insane inside moves at every opportunity, going up for ill-fated dunks and making some of them, smearing a lot of guys with his sweat. The Oakland crowd, which had been abuzz with expectations of seeing the Vanilla Dunk Revue, fell to a low, ugly murmur. When Elwood got called for another foul I was almost relieved; that made five, and with six he'd foul out of the game, and it would be over.

But he wasn't quite done. On the next play he pulled down a rebound and dribbled the length of the court, flattening a Warrior on his way up. I waited for the ref's whistle, but no whistle came. The Warrior center braced himself between Elwood and the net. Elwood ran straight at him, tossed off a perfunctory head fake, and then went up with a spinning move, his bulk barely clearing a tremendous head-on collision with the jumping center. He jammed the ball down with both hands and hit the glass so hard it shattered.

Suddenly the arena was dead silent, as Elwood and the Warrior center fell in a tangle amid a rain of plexiglass fragments. When the two men got up unhurt the roar started. The referees called the game a Warrior victory by forfeit, and Elwood took them on singlehandedly; we had to drag him off the floor.

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When we got him into the clubhouse we found Gornan already showered and in his street clothes, giving his version of events to the press.

I looked up the details on Maurice Lucas's career once. I was working on a theory that the basketball skills you sampled contained an element of the previous player's personality, some kind of style or attitude that was intrinsic to the way they played, something that could be imparted, gradually, to the later player, along with the actual basketball skills.

Well, bingo, as far as Maurice Lucas and Elwood Fossett were concerned. Lucas, it turned out, spent a considerable part of his career feeling misunderstood and underpaid. Specifically underpaid in comparison to the white players on his team. As a result he spent a lot of time playing *angry*. I mean apart from the forcefulness that came with him (and Elwood) being so big and strong; his game was specifically fueled by rage.

Another result of the conflicts in his career was that he was widely understood to have dogged it, to have played intentionally poorly, as a kind of protest, during some of the key years of his career. Which got me thinking: the skills that Elwood inherited might also contain an element of this struggle that Lucas was waging against himself, to suppress his skills, to not give the best of what he had to the company men he hated.

Elwood wouldn't have known, either. Maurice Lucas's career was before his time. Elwood's interest in basketball history went as far back as Michael Jordan's rookie year.

McFront started in Elwood's place the next night, and Elwood went back to the lockers, got dressed, and walked out. Gornan had a great two quarters, undeniable as basketball, unsurpassable as spectacle, and in the locker room at the half he was more exuberant than usual, clowning with Pharoah and McFront, turning the charm he'd previously saved for the media on his teammates. It was a fun scene, but it made me a little sick to see Elwood being drummed out so easily, even if he'd opened the door to it himself, with his walkout.

On the bench during the second half I scooted up next to Coach Van.

"You're letting this team fall apart," I said.

"Come on, Lassner."

"What?"

"You're not gonna start this in the middle of a game." He sounded tired of the conversation before it had even started. "Nobody's letting the team fall apart. This could be a championship team."

"This could have *been* a championship team. Now it's a championship Vanilla Dunk and his Dunkettes."

He made a face.

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"What does ownership say?" I asked.

"What do you think? Fishall wants Gornan starting every game. The fans want it too. As long as we're winning I'm gonna have a tough time arguing for anything else."

"Yeah."

"I want Elwood out there too, Bo, but if he doesn't even suit up—"

"I know, I know."

"Look, I can't make everybody like Gornan. *I* don't particularly like him. But if you get Elwood back in here, he'll see playing time. The backboard—that's no big deal. Just more headlines, is the way Fishall sees it. But this walkout deal—"

He didn't finish his sentence. Something happened out on the floor, something that, as it turned out, would change everything. There was a crash, and a loud sigh, and the crowd fell to silence. It was so quiet you could make out the squeak of the team doctor's sneakers as he crossed the floor, rushing towards the fallen player.

I got up and peered over the top of the cluster of players, but couldn't see anything. So I counted heads. It was a Knick on the floor, and height—or rather, lack of it—told me it was Sal Pharoah.

In a minute they had him on his feet, and the crowd started buzzing again, which made things feel more normal. Pharoah walked with his head bowed, while the doctor peeled the exosuit away from his damaged wrist. They hurried him off toward the trainer's room and a couple of kids with towels rushed over and wiped the sweat off the floor where he'd fallen.

Coach Van slapped me on the ass. "Wake up, Lassner. Get in there."

I stumbled out onto the floor and we restarted the game. We'd built up a good lead, and even without Pharoah or Elwood available we cruised to victory—mostly on the strength of Gornan's play, I have to admit. He was the only one on the floor who didn't seem a little stunned by Pharoah's going down. I did my best to fill the role of Gornan's protector, though I must admit I felt a renegade urge to do what Elwood would have wanted, and leave him out there naked.

At the start of the fourth quarter, before Coach Van pulled the starters out, it hit me that with me, McFront, and Vanilla Dunk our entire frontcourt was white—the first time the Knicks had had more whites than blacks on the floor since I'd joined the team.

Sal Pharoah had broken his right wrist in the fall, and he'd be out for at least six weeks, probably more—I learned that from the television in our hotel room that night. Elwood burst in half an hour later, and he learned it from me.

What it meant, of course, was that I was the starting center for the

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time being. It also meant good things for Elwood, if he behaved himself. With Pharoah out he was our only enforcer, so he'd probably get the nod over McFront. With me in instead of Pharoah we also lost a lot of defense and rebounding, and Elwood was a better defender and rebounder than McFront.

On the other hand, Pharoah had served as a buffer between Gornan and Elwood—also between Gornan and the rest of the league, all those teams frustrated by being beaten by a white hotdog who was getting more endorsements in his rookie year than they'd see for their whole careers. I wasn't going to be able to serve that role. I wasn't strong enough, or black enough. That role fell to Elwood. The two of them had to play together or the team was in trouble.

Two nights later, in L.A., against the Time Warner Lakers, I saw that the team was in trouble.

The Lakers were a team that would have tested us with Pharoah on the floor. It was bad timing that we hit them on the first night without him, and the first night since Elwood's walkout. We should have had a patsy, a fallguy, to give us confidence, to give Elwood and Gornan a chance to have some fun together. No such luck.

In the first quarter Gornan was playing his usual game, to the delight of the crowd. He was scoring a lot of the time but we weren't coming up with any rebounds, and our defense had nothing, and very quickly the Lakers were up by ten points. I got all passive, starting leaning on my jump shot, and left the inside open, waiting for Elwood to take over. But Elwood was invisible. He was playing man-to-man defense so stubbornly that he had nothing left for the fast break. He was putting on a clinic, demonstrating what Gornan was doing wrong, but Gornan wasn't paying any attention, and the crowd didn't have the faintest idea what was going on.

At halftime the Lakers were fifteen points up, and in the second half things really started breaking down. Gornan tried to compensate the only way he knew how, by diving for ridiculous steals, hogging the ball even more, putting on an air show. He got fouled so hard I actually started to get a little worried about him, but each time he jumped back up with a grin. I tried to play a little post-up but the Lakers' center, who had Artis Gilmore's skills, was making me look stupid. Our guards were working the margins, trying to get us into the game from the perimeter, but the Lakers were picking up every rebound, so missed shots from the outside were very costly.

Elwood lost his patience, started falling off the defense and trying to mount a show of his own. As usual he strung together some impressive slams, and for a minute the momentum seemed ours, but another minute later he racked up two fouls in a row and the Lakers beefed up their

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score at the free throw line. There isn't any way to defend against free throws—not that anyone was playing defense.

Gornan responded as only he could, by taking up increasingly improbable moves. They had two or three guys on him every time he touched the ball, and he was turning it over a lot. He was airborne, but a lot of balls were being stripped away on the way up.

By the fourth quarter I was exhausted, and humiliated. Coach Van called a time out and I jogged reflexively toward the bench, but he wasn't taking me out. He subbed McFront in for Elwood and sent in another rookie for Gornan. We lost the game by twenty-three points, our worst margin of the season so far.

We lost in a similar fashion the next night, and at the end Coach Van called me and Elwood and Gornan into his office. I assumed the idea was to mediate between the two of them, and that I was there more or less as Elwood's official interpreter.

"What's happening, guys?" said Coach Van.

Gornan jumped right in. "We need a center who can play, Coach."

"What?" I blurted.

"Sorry, man," said Gornan. "But let's face facts."

"I was starting for this team before you—"

"Whoa," said Coach Van. "Relax, Bo. Alan, that wasn't exactly what I had in mind. Seems to me the team is suffering from what I'd call, for want of a better word, a feud."

"Feud?" Gornan played completely dumb. Elwood just sulked in his chair.

"I don't care about the personal stuff," said Coach Van. "It's a matter of how you play. You have to play like you like each other. You have to be able to pretend on the court. You guys don't seem to be managing it, and it shows in your game."

"Hey, me and Bo get along fine," said Gornan. "Far as I know. But he's just not as strong as Pharoah under the net. If me and Elwood's games are hurting, that's the reason why."

"This is ridiculous," I said. Gornan's strategy began to dawn on me. He was going to pretend he hadn't even noticed Elwood's hostility. It was instinctively brilliant, and vicious. He'd avoid the appearance of a black-white conflict by cutting me down instead.

I looked over at Elwood, but he wasn't offering me any help.

"Look," said Gornan. "Me and Elwood are playing the same as when the team was winning. Lassner here is the difference."

"Are you gonna take this?" I said to Elwood. "He's saying that the way you've been playing in the last few games is your normal game. Can't you see what a veiled insult that is? You can play a hell of a lot better—"

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"You getting down on my game, Lassner?" growled Elwood. "You a fine one to fucking talk, man."

"No, no, I mean, I'm just trying to say, look at what *he's* saying—"

"Enough, Bo. Be quiet for a minute. Maybe I've misunderstood the situation—"

"Coach," I protested, "Gornan is twisting this—"

"Let me talk! As I was saying, I don't know the details, I don't want to know the details. What matters is the chemistry sucks right now. All three of you are playing below your capabilities. That's my opinion, and I've told ownership as much, and I'll tell the press the same when we get home. That's all for now."

End of meeting.

We lost the last two games of the road trip and flew back to New York. On the plane I slept and dreamed of missed shots. The cabbie who took me back to my Brooklyn apartment asked me how I felt about the trade.

"What trade?" I asked, and the cabbie just said: "I'm sorry."

The Disney Heat were a mediocre team with one big star: Gerald Flynnan, their center. He played with the skills of Akeem Olajuwon, and he carried their team to the lower rounds of the playoffs each year, but no further. The rest of the team was talented but young, disorganized, and possibly stupid.

Knicks management had offered me, Elwood, and a first round lottery pick to the Heat in exchange for Flynnan, and the Disney team had taken the bait. The Knicks picked up a dominant center to replace the injured Pharoah, and to fill his shoes in protecting Vanilla Dunk. And they'd gotten rid of the tension in their frontcourt by unloading Elwood; McFront and Dunk would start.

What the Heat got was a mid-season mess: an angry, talented star and a tall white guy with a jump shot. The lottery spot wouldn't help the team until next year. Elwood and I were flown down and in the Disney uniforms before we knew what hit us, and the coach tossed us into a game before we'd even had a chance to introduce ourselves to the other players.

The result was an ugly loss, but then the players there seemed pretty used to that.

The crowd too. The Disney fans were a jaded, abusive bunch, mostly concerned with heckling Coach Wilder for not playing local favorite Earlharm "Early" Natt, a talented eccentric who carried the skills of Marvin Barnes. At the start of the game they cheered Elwood and greeted me with shouts of "Where's Gerald?," but by halftime they were drinking beer and shouting for Early Natt, a request which Coach Wilder ignored except in the final, hopeless moments of each game. Natt looked pretty

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dynamic when he got in, which explained the crowd's affection. He also paid zero attention to defense or team play, which explained the coach's resistance.

The same pattern held in the two losses that followed.

That brought us to the all-star break. Elwood and I were 0-3 with our new team, and nobody was particularly happy. I couldn't figure Elwood—he was playing quiet, walking quiet, and, I suspected, mixing a little thinking in with his brooding. For my part, I was just trying to keep my head above water—to my embarrassment, I was exhausted by starting every night. Plus management and media caught on that I was the communicative one of the new pair, which meant I was answering questions for me and Elwood both.

The all-star break gave us most of a week before we played again, and Elwood surprised me by suggesting we get out of town. He'd located a beach hotel on Key West with a nearby high school gym we could rent. I agreed. Without having to say so, we were both avoiding paying any attention to the all-star game, which was sure to be yet another installment of the Vanilla Dunk show.

Elwood shocked me again by getting up first that morning, to rouse me out of bed. He called up a breakfast on room service; I swear in all our years rooming together I'd never seen him pick up a phone before.

At the gym he said: "Okay, Lassner. I'm gonna teach your tall white ass how to play a trapping defense."

"What?"

"You heard."

"What is this punishment for, Elwood? What did I do? Just tell me."

"Here—" He threw me the ball.

And proceeded to do exactly what he'd promised.

The next day word had got around—possibly with Elwood's help, I never found out—that a couple of pros were working out in the local gym. Six guys showed up: confident, tall kids out to impress, all lean and strong from boating on the island, a couple of them with real talent. Elwood worked them into the clinic he was giving me, and they and he spent the next four days busting my ass.

I went back to Miami exhausted, and Elwood still wouldn't tell me what he was getting at.

It quickly became clear, however, that he'd been looking at the schedule. The first team we played after the break was the Knicks. That afternoon in practice, while the rest of the team was drilling, he took Coach Wilder aside.

"Let me call the plays tonight," he said, as if it were the most natural thing in the world.

"What?"

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"Let me call the plays." He actually smiled.

"We're playing the Knicks."

"Exactly."

"What are you saying, Elwood?"

"You traded for me, man. Give me a night to run the show. One night. If you don't like the results we go back to your way tomorrow. Nobody will ever know."

I walked over to show my support—for what, I didn't exactly know. "Give him a half, at least," I said.

"He did this in New York?" asked Coach Wilder.

"Yes," I lied.

Elwood pulled Early Natt off the bench as we took the floor at the start of the game, saying to him only, "Go crazy."

I got Elwood aside. "Okay," I said. "I've waited long enough. What's the deal here, Elwood?"

"We're gonna defend these mothers," he said. "That's the deal. Our guards can play a zone defense if they hang back. You and me are boxing out Dunk, taking the rebounds, stripping the ball. Don't hold anything back."

"What's Early doing?"

"Cherry-picking. Out-dunking the Dunk."

"I never saw Marvin Barnes play," I said, "but I didn't think he could hang with Michael Jordan. Early is stupid, Elwood."

"We're not playing against Michael Jordan," said Elwood. "We're playing against Vanilla Dunk. Jordan had an integrated game. The best there ever was. Dunk's just a show. I've played a little one-on-one with Early. He can put on a show, if he doesn't have to think about defense or passing, and if the coach isn't breathing down his neck. That's our job, Lassner. Keep Early from having to think about anything. He'll put on a show. Trust me."

Gerald Flynnan, the Knicks' new center, beat me on the tip-off, so the Knicks came up with the ball. I followed Elwood's lead—after the week of drills, it was second nature. We charged the ball, my hands up wide and high to block the pass, Elwood's hands low for the steal off the dribble. Our guards scurried behind us on the zone defense, picking up the slack.

Otis Pettingale beat us on a headfake and went up. Score: Gulf and Western 2, Disney 0.

One of our guards fed it in to me, and Elwood hissed, "Up to Early!" I did what I was told. Early Natt was halfway up the court. He twisted through three Knicks, not looking back to see if he had any support, and scored. Tie game.

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The second time up the court the ball was in Vanilla Dunk's hands, and Elwood seemed to go into another time signature. He was all over him. Dunk dribbled back and circled and came up again. I put up my hands and cut off a pass opportunity. Dunk hesitated, and Elwood stripped the ball away. A flip pass upcourt into Early's hands and we were ahead.

The crowd went wild. Not because they had any idea of what Elwood and me were up to, but because Early was in the game, showing off, doing the only thing he knew how to do: score. The Knicks brought the ball back to us, and this time Elwood took it away from McFront, tipping it into my waiting hands. Not waiting to be told this time, I tossed it to Early. Score.

The strategy was working, at least for the moment. No team in the league played this kind of defense, and it had the Knicks confused. High on the novelty of it, and the crowd's response, we roared to a fifteen-point lead by halftime. Elwood ran back to the bench and spread his hands in a mute appeal to Coach Wilder.

"This one's yours," said the coach.

In the second half the Knicks adjusted somewhat, and I got tired and had to sit for a few minutes. Flynnan bulled his way through Elwood for six straight points, and Otis added a couple of outside shots, and they nearly tied it. But Vanilla Dunk looked all flummoxed, and he never got into the game. A few minutes later we opened up the lead again and we ended up winning by five points.

I took Elwood aside in the locker room. The media all wanted Early Natt anyway. "When I was sitting in the third period I checked my suit," I said. "It wasn't working."

Elwood just smiled, and made a little pair of imaginary scissors with his fingers.

"You fucked with my suit?"

"I just noticed you play better without it, man. You think I didn't see you were turning it off?"

"That's just for my jump shot!"

"I saw you in practice in Key West, whiteboy. You play better without it. Notice I ain't saying you play *good*. Just better."

"Fuck you, Elwood."

It was a nice night, but it was just a night. A fluke loss by the almighty Knicks—it happens sometimes. The Vanilla Dunk Revue went back to cakewalking its way to a championship, while we struggled on, treading water in the middle of our division, barely clinging to our playoff hopes. Surprisingly, Elwood didn't seem that interested in applying the defensive techniques we'd developed together against any of the other teams.

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Oh, we trapped here and there, but Elwood didn't ever take command the way he had. He seemed to go back into a trance, like he'd done when we were first traded. We won our share of games, but nobody was particularly impressed. As for Early Natt, he saw more minutes, but they only seemed to give him more opportunities to blow it, and soon enough he was in the doghouse. Elwood had abandoned him. I guess Elwood liked that one-dimensional game a little better on a hapless black man than he liked it on an arrogant white one, but not so much that he wanted to encourage Early to make it a regular habit.

Elwood and I were shooting alone in the gym when I asked, "Why don't we go back to that trapping game?"

He didn't even turn around, just sank a shot as he answered. "Element of surprise the only thing makes it work, Bo. Teams'd see through that shit if we hauled it out two nights in a row."

"Some great teams won with defense, back—"

"Shut up, Bo. You don't know what you're talkin' about."

"What have we got to lose?"

"Shut up."

Elwood's playing got more and more distracted, and we went on a losing streak, but I didn't catch on until two weeks before the end of the season, when the Knicks came to town again. I waited for Elwood to rouse us again, to make a big demonstration, and instead he played in what was becoming his usual trance. He almost seemed to be taking a masochistic thrill in letting Vanilla Dunk run wild.

The next day I glanced at the papers, and I realized that, for once, Elwood was watching the standings.

We had to lose three games in the standings to drop out of a regular playoff spot, and into the wild card spot. The wild card team played the team with the conference's best record in the first round of the playoffs, in a quick best-of-five series, a sort of warm-up for the real playoffs.

The Knicks, thanks to their win over us the night before, were now the team with the best record, by one game over the Pistons.

In other words, the victory over the Knicks earlier in the season wasn't the main point; that was just Elwood finding out if he could do it.

Elwood and Coach Wilder yelled at each other for a straight half hour in the visiting coach's office in the bowels of the Garden. In the meantime I was left to play diplomat with the press and the rest of the team. I'd never been in the visitors' locker rooms of the Garden before, and it frankly got me a little depressed. I'd never dared mention it to Elwood, but I *missed* the Knicks.

When they came out it was Coach Wilder who looked beaten. Elwood

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didn't say anything to me, but his eyes said he'd won his point. When we got out on the floor he flipped the practice ball to Early Natt, then crooked a finger and beckoned Early over to him.

"Remember when I told you to go crazy?" he said.

Early just nodded, smiling defensively. He looked a little intimidated by the roar of the Garden crowd.

"We gonna do that again. Remember how?"

Early nodded.

"Just stay uptown, look for the pass. Stay open, that's all." Elwood turned to me, but didn't say anything, just stretched his arms up in the air. I mirrored them with my own—albeit six inches higher.

Our moment was swallowed in a roar, as the Knicks came out of the lockers and were greeted by the crowd in the Garden. I looked out and then back down at the Heat uniform on my chest. I felt about as small as a seven-foot guy can feel, at that moment.

This time I somehow beat Flynnan on the tip-off, flipping the ball to one of our guards. We went up the court and scored, Elwood sinking a jumper from midway out. The Knicks inbounded and I realized I was frozen, that I wasn't following Elwood into the trap defense. The Knicks got the ball to Vanilla Dunk. Dunk flew upcourt, Elwood dogging his steps, and broke loose for a fabulous mid-air hook shot. I cursed myself.

Elwood grabbed the ball and hurled it upcourt to Early who ran into a crowd and had the ball stripped away. Defense again. This time I rushed the ball—it was in Otis's hands—and forced a weak pass to Flynnan, who was too far out for his shot. I jumped on Flynnan, my hands in his face, and heard a whistle. I'd fouled him.

Flynnan went to the line and hit both shots. 4-2, Knicks.

Elwood rushed the ball to Early again, passing into a thicket of Knicks, and Early was immediately fouled. Early went to the line and missed one.

The Knicks came up and Flynnan rolled over me for an easy layup. God, he's a big mother, I wanted to whisper to Elwood, but Elwood wasn't meeting my eye.

Elwood went up, got caught in traffic, and bailed out to one of our guards, who threw up a brick from outside. Flynnan and I fought for the rebound, and Flynnan won. He dumped it out to Vanilla Dunk, who immediately had Elwood all over him. I rushed up from behind and stabbed at the ball.

Dunk twisted out from between us, head-faked, made a move. The move didn't come off. He and Elwood tangled up and fell together. A whistle. The ref signaled: offensive foul, Knicks. Number double zero, Alan Gornan. Vanilla Dunk.

Dunk got up screaming. Elwood shook himself out and turned his back.

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The ref rushed up between them while a kid wiped the sweat off the floor.

Then Dunk yelled one word too many.

"What?" Elwood turned fast and got in his face, real close, without touching. The ref squirted out of the way.

"I said nigger," repeated Dunk.

They both drew back a fist. I grabbed Elwood from behind, so he couldn't get his shot off. Don't ask me why I grabbed Elwood instead of Dunk.

Vanilla Dunk's punch was off-line. It slammed into Elwood's shoulder. That was his only shot. The other Knicks were all over him.

The refs threw them both out of the game, and soon, all too soon, it was restarted. With Elwood gone it was too much a matter of me against Flynnan, and it was Flynnan's night. I couldn't hang with him. For help on offense all I had was Early, who seemed completely cowed by the Garden and baffled with Elwood gone. I tried to dump it off to him, but he'd lost sight of the basket, kept trying dumb passes instead. Whereas Flynnan had McFront, who'd found his midrange shot, and was pouring in pull-up jumpers.

They blew us out. An hour later I was sitting on the edge of my hotel bed, watching it on television. Early Natt and one of our guards were there with me, but the room was silent except for the tube. Elwood had disappeared, so we didn't have to be ashamed to watch the sportscast.

It was Vanilla Dunk all the way. He'd run straight to the press, as usual, and the tape of his interview was replayed every fifteen minutes. The commissioner had already decided: both players were available to their teams for the rest of the series. Elwood would be fined five thousand. Dunk, who'd thrown a punch, would pay fifteen thou. I'd saved Elwood ten grand by grabbing him. And probably saved Dunk a broken jaw.

They barely even mentioned the fact that we'd lost. I guess the New York press considered that pretty much a foregone conclusion.

I flipped to MTV just in time to catch Vanilla Dunk's new video "(Dunkin') In Yo Face".

Elwood showed up just in time for the second game. I never did find out where he spent that night. For a minute I was afraid he was stoned on something—I'd seen him stoned, and gotten stoned with him, but never before a game—because he looked too happy, too loose. I even wondered for a second if he somehow thought we'd won last night.

There wasn't time to confer. He flipped a thumbs up signal to Coach Wilder, and called Early over to him. The coach just shook his head. A minute later the refs started the game.

I put my head down and vowed to get physical with Flynnan. I wanted

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rebounds, I wanted blocked shots, I wanted steals. I wanted Elwood not to hate me, primarily. He still wasn't meeting my eye.

Otis missed a shot and Elwood came down with the rebound, and passed it to Early with nearly the same motion. Early ducked underneath Flynnan and jumped up to the height of the basket. Slam.

The Knicks came upcourt and put the ball in Dunk's hands. Elwood and I swarmed him. He faked a move, pivoted, then faked a pass, which shook Elwood for half a second. Half a second was all Dunk needed: he went up.

But I got my hand around the ball, and stuffed his shot backward, out of his hands. It bounced upcourt, to Early, who was alone.

Slam.

The Knicks came back up, and McFront hit from outside. We took it back up and this time Elwood faked to Early and twisted inside himself for a pretty backward layup. 6-2, Visitors.

Otis brought it up for the Knicks, and flipped it to Flynnan, inside. I went up and matched his jump, forced him to dump it off or be stuffed. He looked for help, didn't find any, and Elwood took the ball away from him. Early was waiting upcourt, like a puppydog. 8-2.

So it went for the first half. We kept Dunk frustrated with our hectoring defense, and I took my game straight to Flynnan, however bruising. McFront's hand wasn't as hot as the night before. Elwood was hyperkinetic on defense.

And on offense, we were making Early look like the star the fans back in Florida had always hoped he would be. All he had was a handful of one-on-one moves, but if you kept him from having to think about anything but the basket he was sensational.

We ended the half with a twenty-two point lead. The Knicks nibbled away in the second half, Otis shining like the Otis of old for a few minutes, but it was our night. We dug in on defense and finished fourteen points up. The crowd drained out of the Garden in silence. We were taking the series back to Florida tied at a game apiece. There were two games on our homecourt, then back to New York.

Unless somebody won two in a row.

For the third game the Knicks just looked tired. They weren't adjusting to our defensive pressure. Vanilla Dunk was wearing his cynical sneer, but you could see it drove him crazy not to be able to cut loose. The Miami crowd gave Flynnan, their ex-hero, a hard time, and he responded by getting sheepish—for the first time I felt I could actually push him around a little.

This one was Early's game. He played to the crowd, and the slams just kept getting showier. Elwood poured in a few himself, but Early was the

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star that night. We led all the way, and the game was over by the third quarter. Both teams pulled their regulars and started thinking about the next game.

Elwood was glowing on the bench. We all were. We had a chance to take it from them. They had to beat us tomorrow to even stay alive. This was supposed to be their year of destiny, the Vanilla Dunk Victory Tour, and we had them down 2-1. The wild card team.

Flynnan woke up. Dunk was still moribund, but Flynnan woke up; I knew because he started punishing me. I was taking down some rebounds, but I was paying in flesh. I looked for help, but who was going to help me? That's the horror of the center: there's just two of you seven-foot monsters out there, and you're enemies. If the other guy's a little bigger and meaner, who's going to tell him to leave you alone? Some shrimpy 6-5 guard? The Tokyo army? The ref? Your mother?

This one wasn't a game. It was a trench battle. Elwood and I were working together, stripping balls away, bottling up the middle, but there was no communication between us. Just sweat and grunts. We had to keep our eyes peeled or we'd be flattened. McFront and Dunk were both fighting to open the lanes, throwing elbows, double-faking to make sure we got our faces in the way. Where were the whistles? I'm sure the Knicks were asking the same question at their end. The refs were letting us duke it out.

It was Knicks 34, Heat 30 late in the second quarter: a defensive struggle. We'd forced the Knicks into our game, and they were playing it. Every time Early touched the ball he was mobbed. He'd dump it back out and our guards would chuck it up from the outside and hope for the best. Most of our points belonged to Elwood, who was scoring by grabbing rebounds and muscling back up for the layup.

We were holding on until two minutes before the half, when Dunk broke loose for a couple in a row, and we went to the lockers down eight points.

Elwood stood to one side, a wild look in his eyes. He wasn't playing coach anymore; he was too far inside himself. He and Dunk had been in each other's faces every minute of the first half, and I could feel the hate burning off Elwood's skin, like gasoline vapor. I could almost imagine that Elwood would rather lose this one and take it back to New York, just to maximize his crazed masochistic war with Dunk, just to push it to the very edge.

I personally had a strong preference for ending it here.

Coach Wilder, seeing that Elwood wasn't receiving, looked over at me. I shrugged. The rest of the team milled nervously, waiting for someone to break the silence.

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"Okay boys," said Coach Wilder courageously. "Let this get away and it's just another tied series going back to New York. That's handing it to them."

No one spoke. Elwood's foot was tapping out accompaniment to some internal rhythm.

"You're only eight points back," said the coach. "Just keep tying them up on defense. They'll turn it over when they get tired."

With his voice trailing away, he sounded like he didn't believe himself. I felt like patting him on the head and sending him to the showers. The fact was it was Elwood's team now, and Elwood didn't give half-time peptalks. We would all have to feed off his energy on the floor; it would happen there or it wouldn't happen at all.

We drifted apart, and what seemed like seconds later we were back on the court. The ball was ours; Elwood hit from midway out and we fell back on defense. We stuck to our one plan, of course: I caged Vanilla Dunk with my long arms, and Elwood harassed the ball from underneath. This time the gamble worked, and we forced a bad pass, which one of our guards picked up. He found Early and Early found the net. We'd closed the gap to four points.

And that's where it stayed. We all gritted our teeth and went back to the trenches; even Vanilla Dunk and Early were playing defense. Both sides would have fouled out if the refs hadn't been squelching the whistle. We forced turnovers, then turned it over ourselves, rolled our eyes, and fell back for defense again. Elwood was a maniac on rebounds, but he'd pass it up to Early and Early would disappear in a cloud of Knick uniforms. Otis stripped the ball from him with two seconds left in the third quarter and chucked up an improbable three-point shot from midcourt which only hit net, putting them up seven points as the buzzer for the fourth sounded.

At the start of the fourth Elwood began trying to do it all, to outrebound everybody at *both* ends of the court, to steal the ball, pass it to Early, then run up and set a pick for Early and rebound Early's shot if he missed. I watched in amazement, near total exhaustion myself just from our frantic play on the defensive end. In frustration with the Knicks' defensive adjustments he started going up himself, with his usual too-powerful stuff moves, scoring some points but committing fouls the refs couldn't ignore. Still, he bulled us to three points back, then doubled over with a leg cramp.

Coach Wilder called a time out. Elwood limped back to the bench.

"Okay, Elwood, you got us close. Now you better sit."

"Uh-uh," said Elwood. "I'm stayin' in. Listen, Early—"

Early leaned in, his eyes wide.

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"You gotta figure out one new trick, 'cause they're bumping you off, man."

"What?" said Early in his high, frightened voice.

"Pass off when you go up now. Don't shoot. Find the big man here." Elwood jerked his thumb at me. "He's big and white, you can't miss him, man. Just throw it up to him every time you get a clean line."

"Elwood," I began to complain, "I'm not like you. I can't go back and forth. I won't make it back on defense if I'm up fighting with Flynnan under their basket."

"Don't go up under their basket," he said. "Shoot from wherever you are when you get the ball, man."

"What?"

"I seen your jumpshot, Lassner. Just shoot."

The time out was over. Elwood hobbled out, massaging his own thigh, and we took the ball up. We fed it in to Early and he drew three men. He spun out and five hands went up between him and the basket.

He didn't try and shoot over the hands. Instead he turned and lobbed a clumsy pass high in the air to me, halfway back to our end of the court.

"Shoot!" hissed Elwood.

I tossed it up, not even noticing which side of the three-point line I was on. It went in.

I panted a thank-you prayer and zeroed in on the ball, which was in Flynnan's hands. I threw myself in his path and forced him to give it up, miraculously avoiding destruction in the process. Elwood followed the ball out to Vanilla Dunk, who pumped, pivoted, pumped, head-faked, shrugged, anything to try to get out of Elwood's cage. He lifted the ball up and I batted it out of bounds.

Elwood stole the inbound pass and scored on a solo drive for a layup.

The Knicks brought it up and Otis, looking frustrated with Dunk, shot from outside. He missed. Elwood directed the ball to Early, who drove to the basket and was surrounded there. He threw it out to me where I stood at the top of the key. "Shoot!" said Elwood again. The ball floated up out of my hands, and hit.

Tie game, four minutes left.

Elwood got too excited and fouled McFront on the next possession. McFront, ever-solid, hit both from the line, putting the Knicks up two. Elwood brought the ball up to midcourt then passed it directly to me, and nodded.

Swish. My jumpshot was on. Practice, I guess.

We traded turnovers again, and then the Knicks called time-out with just over two minutes left. Their season was getting very, very small. We only went halfway to the bench and then just hovered there, waiting

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for the Knicks to come back out. There wasn't anything to say. We were too pumped up to huddle and trade homilies. Too much in the zone.

The Knicks brought it up and Flynnan staked out prime real estate under the net. I sighed and went in to try and box him out. He got the ball and I went up with him, tipped the shot away. Elwood took it and charged upcourt, slamming it home at the other end.

Since he was all the way up there anyway he decided to steal the inbound pass and do it again, and we suddenly had a four-point lead.

But Elwood was tired, and at the wrong end of the floor. They sent Vanilla Dunk up. I tried to stop him alone; we both jumped. I landed what seemed like a couple of seconds before he did. His jam was a poster-shot, I heard later. I sure didn't see it.

We came up again and sent Early in to try and answer. He got caught in traffic and bailed it out to me, and I shot from where I stood all alone, in three-point territory.

That made four in a row for me, and a five point lead for the team.

They answered with a quick basket. So quick that I glanced at the clock; we were in a position to run the clock out. I brought it up slow, dribbling with my big body curled protectively around the ball.

"Nobody foul!" I heard Coach Wilder yell from the sidelines. Thanks, coach. I passed it to Elwood. He passed it to one of our guards, who passed it back to me. Flynnan lunged for the ball, and I passed it away again. It got passed around the circuit, everybody touching it except Early, who wouldn't have known what to do with it. He only existed in two dimensions; up and down. Time was beyond him.

The ball came back to me with two seconds on the shot clock. What the hell, I thought, and chucked it up.

Swish.

We'd won. Five points up with 16 seconds. No way for them to come back. The Knicks milked it, of course, using two time-outs, scoring once, but two commercials later we got official confirmation. When the final buzzer sounded we had a nice healthy three point edge.

The locker room was mayhem. All the Disney executive people I'd managed never to meet wanted to shake my hand. The media swarmed, media-like. Some beer company exec gave Early Natt an award for series MVP and they stuck a mike in his face and Early just grinned and made this sort of bubbling sound with his lips, ignoring the questions. Another bunch of TV people isolated me and Elwood by our lockers, and I readied myself to do the talking once again.

"Well, Elwood, care to break your media silence for once?"

Elwood paused, then grinned. "Sure, asshole, let's break some silence. What you wanna know?"

The reporter clung to his pasted-on smile. "Uh, you were a real leader

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out there, Elwood. Some would say the MVP belongs to you. You took an unconventional mix of talents and made them work together—"

Elwood stuck his big finger against the reporter's chest. "You wanna know who the star of this team is?"

"Uh—"

"This dude here, man. He's taught himself to play without sampling, man, 'cause the skills they gave him sucked, and he didn't even tell anybody. Me, Early, Vanilla Fucking Dunk, all them other dudes are playing with exosuits, but not my man Lassner, man. He's a defensive star. He can hang with the exosuits, man, and that's a rare thing." He laughed. "He's also got this funny jump shot ain't too bad. Big white elbows stickin' out all over the place, but it ain't too bad. No suit for that either."

They turned to me. I nodded and shrugged and looked back to Elwood.

"How does it feel beating Michael Jordan?" The question was directed at either one of us, but Elwood picked it up again.

"Didn't beat Michael Jordan," he said angrily. "Beat Vanilla Dunk. If that was Jordan we wouldn't have beat him."

"What's going to become of your feud?"

Elwood's face went through a quick series of expressions; first angry, then sarcastic, then sealed-up, like he wasn't going to talk any more. Then he went past that, smiling at himself for a minute before answering the question.

What came out was a strangely heartfelt jumble of sports clichés. I don't mean to be insulting when I say that I don't think I ever saw Elwood speak from a deeper place within himself than at that moment. I really do think he was the last modernist in a sport gone completely postmodern.

"There ain't no feud. Alan Gornan is a rookie, man, and you got to give him time to put it together. I was honored to play alongside the man in New York and I'm honored to face him now. I hope we meet many times again—after the Heat wins this championship, that is. I'm sure he'll grow into the suit. Ain't no feud. I plan to beat the man every time I can, but when he beats me it ain't gonna be Michael Jordan then, neither, man. It's gonna be Gornan, or Dunk or whatever he wants to call his ass, and when he does I'll shake the dude's hand. Here, you oughta ask the big white dufus some questions now."

That should be the end of the story, but it isn't. Elwood and I were in a bar two hours later when the sportschannel switched to a live broadcast of Vanilla Dunk's press conference, his last with the big Knicks logo on the wall behind him.

His agent spoke first. "Mr. Gornan has reached an agreement with

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United Artists Tokyo, regarding his motion picture and recording career—"

"What about the Knicks?"

"UA Tokyo has purchased Mr. Gornan's contract from Gulf and Western. This is a binding, five-year agreement which guarantees Mr. Gornan eight million a year before box-office—"

"I wanted to wait 'til the end of the season to make this announcement," said Dunk. "Didn't think it would come this quick, but hey—" he paused to sneer "—that's the way it goes. Look out America, we're gonna make some movies!"

"Dunk—what about basketball?"

He smirked. "That's a little rough for me, y'know? Gotta stay pretty." He rubbed his face exaggeratedly. "You'll see plenty of action on the screen, anyway. Might even dunk a few." He winked.

Elwood and I sat watching, silently transfixed. The implications sank in gradually. The Jordan skills were gone; league rules stated that they were retired with the player. The occasion that Elwood had so slowly and painfully risen to had vanished, been whisked away, in an instant.

"Tell us about the films," said a reporter.

"Ahh, we're still working out my character. Called Vanilla Dunk, of course. Gonna do some fightin', some rappin', some other stuff. Not like anything you've ever seen before, so you'll just have to wait."

"The contract includes album and video production," added the agent. "You'll be seeing Vanilla Dunk on the charts as well as on the screen."

"Your whole sports career is over, then? No championships?"

He snorted. "This is bigger than a sports career, my friend. *I'm* bigger. Besides, sports is just entertainment, anyway. I'm still in the *entertainment* business."

"Your decision anything to do with Elwood Fossett?"

He cocked his head. "Who?"

I turned away from the television. I started to speak, but stopped when I saw Elwood's expression, which was completely hollow.

And that *is* the end of the story.

I'd like to say we went on to win the championship, but life doesn't work that way. The Hyundai Celtics beat us in the next round of the playoffs. They seemed completely ready for our defense, and we were lucky to win one game. Elwood faded in and out, tantalizingly brilliant and then godawful in the space of five minutes. The Celtics went on to lose to the Coors Suns in the final.

I myself did win a ring, later, after I was traded to the Lakers. That led indirectly to a fancy Hollywood party where I got to drunkenly tell

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Alan Gornan what I thought of him. I garbled my lines, but it was still pretty satisfying.

Elwood I mostly lost touch with after my trade. We partied when the Lakers went to Miami, and when the Heat came to L.A. I had him over for dinner with my second wife—an awkward scene, but we played it a few times.

When I think about what happened with him and Vanilla Dunk, I always come around to the same question. Assuming that it's right to view the whole episode as a personal battle between the two of them—who won? Sometimes I drive myself crazy with it. I mean, who came out on top, really?

Other times I conclude that there's something really pretty fundamentally stupid about the question. ●

WHY I READ SCIENCE FICTION

Xeno said, "You just can't go half way;
half way to half way intervenes,
and half of half of half, dwindling
by halves to infinity. Between one point
and the next lies the microscopic
but unbreachable gulf no motion,
starting at one point as a motion must,
can transcend. Beginning and end
are one. And so too Time,
since all Time's measure is one kind
of motion or another. Time too
is impossible."

What makes all this illusion then
is Mind. Mind, unmoving, but aware
of one fixed instant and the next,
makes Time and motion *seem* to go.
So, if Xeno's right, Jules Verne
stepped first on the moon, and Wells
was first to travel history. And we,
mounted on their backs, ride
the engine of the world.

—William John Watkins

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KING FOR A DAY

Leslie What

Leslie What is a professional maskmaker and artist, and a past member of the New Orleans Maskmaker's Guild. She recently collaborated on a book of memoirs and is now writing a novel. "King for a Day" is her first sale.

He disliked Memphis, but He'd been drawn back to the scorching heat with the million or so other moths who stood beside Him, flitting about, their sleeves rolled up to let their tattoos breathe. Graceland was once a church; now it was a shrine, and He was uncomfortable at the idea of standing in line to worship Himself. There was enough steam in the August air to generate electricity for the month, and His cream-colored suit dripped over Him like an extra fold of skin.

His shirt swelled tight around the neck, strangling Him until He clawed at the top three buttons and they popped off. Now he looked more like the others, He thought, smiling to Himself because He hadn't worn His shirts open in years. He could not help but look down on them. *They* were Elvis impersonators. *He* was impersonating *them*. That distinction, however important He thought it, had never helped Him get a job.

They waited in line for their chance to sing in the outdoor amphitheater built for the anniversary celebration of His death. Strains of guitar music floated above a thick layer of haze which wafted toward Him. He recognized the music and tried to tune it out, but the melody, *Imagine*, kept circling inside His head like spun sugar.

The sidewalk was so hot that His rubber-soled shoes were melting to the cement like dog droppings, and He looked around for some cool grass to stand on. He noticed a sweet olive tree growing along the road. He bent down to smell the scent of the blossoms, but the air was so thick that His nostrils pinched shut, and He had to pluck a stem, practically

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stuffing it up His nose, before the fragrance—freed by the heat—began to rise.

He remembered the story His mama had told Him about sweet olive. In the good old days when a person died, their body was kept inside the parlor until the funeral. During the summer months, the odor grew so strong that mourners had to break off sweet olive branches to wave in front of their noses like smelling salts in order to view the deceased.

He put the branch inside the pocket of His wrinkled jacket, closed His eyes, and took a deep breath of the hot stale air. It was His meditation, His way of readying Himself before a performance, and He waited until He felt a sense of calm drain through Him before opening His eyes to the day.

The tryouts depressed Him. It was always the same answer from promoters. "Your voice is good, but you're too old and too fat," followed by the cattle call, "Next!" He would walk away quickly, fighting to keep His head above the level of His shoulders, while the echo of "Love Me Tender" followed Him out the door.

He never let on about His disappointment. Rejection was bad enough, but to show that He cared was worse. He'd been able to find work as a truck driver, the job lasting until His temper gave out, and He ran one too many sports car off the road to be kept on.

It was true that He carried an extra seventy-five pounds, but when He wore the corset and stood up straight, He rather thought it looked like only fifty. His hair had turned to salt and pepper, without the pepper. The others all colored theirs black, but He had not been able to bring Himself to do it. How far would He have to sink, He wondered, before He'd join the ranks of impersonators who looked more like Ronald Reagan in drag than the King?

He shifted His position and watched the others waiting for their turn on stage, envying them for their fancy guitars and new clothes. He had a good chance this time, He told Himself. They were hiring twenty or thirty at least for the celebration. He was sure to get the job. His luck was going to change.

He'd tried to get gigs on His own as Jesse Garon, the name of His stillborn twin. Funny though, when He sang as Jesse, the promoters told Him, "Sorry. You need your own style. You sound like Elvis from the beyond."

"That's what I *am*," He'd say, shaking His head, because the *real* Elvis wasn't what anybody wanted. He didn't mind so much losing out on jobs because of that. What hurt more was being turned down as an *impersonator*, because it meant that He was something less than a shadow of Himself.

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He had fifty dollars left before He'd need to find another job, or another woman to cozy up to. He had not eaten in days, and He'd given up on getting His good guitar out of hock.

Something brushed past Him, wearing more perfume than a case of deodorant. He turned to watch a woman who was walking slowly along the sidewalk. She was easily fifty, weighing at least her age above voluptuous, with platinum hair that showed black roots like newsprint. She stopped and turned to stare at Him. Her face was swollen, her eyes puffy, but she had an innocent look that made Him feel guilty for what He was about to do.

"Hello, *darlin'*," He called out, hanging onto the drawl for as long as He could and still breathe. "You here to watch the show? I'm going to be in it, but I have to try out first. Maybe we could have lunch after that. I know a great little place downtown that serves grits and sausage up till dinner. I'd love for you to come with Me."

She smiled and walked back toward Him. Her high heels wobbled and He saw that her shoes were dirty and well-worn. Despite the heat, she was wearing a ragged white fox stole over a tight chiffon dress that hugged her behind like a ham hock covered in shrink wrap.

"I was looking for the try-outs," she said in a voice that hovered like Cool Whip ready to fall off the spoon.

"You don't need to try out," He said, oozing His oil slick smile. "You so beautiful, they gonna hire you without thinking."

She giggled and cast her eyes downward.

"What's your name, sweetie?" He asked, making Himself lean forward until He was sure she could feel His breath above the heat against her skin. She was at least as old as the last few He'd had, but something about her sickened Him: her bloated skin, the gray behind the pallor of her sweating flesh.

"I'm Marilyn," she sighed.

"Marilyn Monroe?" He asked, laughing. "Don't tell Me. You're here to try out for the Marilyn Monroe festival, right? Good God, woman, you are twice her size and ten times as ugly!"

She frowned, then burst into tears and waddled away from Him. "Wait," He called after her. "Come back. I was only kidding."

The line was moving up and He stumbled forward to keep His place. He cleared His throat and began to hum, "I'm so lonesome, I could cry," but the song was so sad that He couldn't bear to hear Himself sing it. He stopped and kicked at a piece of cardboard lying near His feet.

"That was one of my favorite songs," said the boy in front of Him, a twenty-something stud in a crisp white jumpsuit embroidered with

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diamonds. "Did you go to Elvis's last concert in Indianapolis? I was there," the boy added eagerly.

"Yeah," He shrugged. "I was there. I was singing."

"As backup? Wow! You *do* look a little like Elvis, for real," said the young man. "You do. Most of us have to make ourselves up, but you really have it down, like the make-up is under your skin. I suppose you hear that all the time."

"So, I look like Elvis, do I?" He said. "What a joke! The reason I look like Elvis is because I *am* Elvis."

The young man laughed nervously. "We all are," he said, and turned away with a shrug.

He moved up, anxious for the tryouts to be over. "Excuse me," He said to the stringy-haired man in wire-rimmed glasses who sat cross-legged on a blanket on the sidewalk. The guitar case was open. Inside was a ten dollar bill and change, a sketch pad, and a bronchial inhaler.

"Pull those legs in, won't you, and let an old man pass by?"

"Good God, it's *you*," said the singer, with an unmistakable Liverpool accent. "I never thought I'd meet up with you again. You were always my favorite, you know that."

"And who are *you*? John Lennon?" He asked. "I suppose you're here to get a job impersonating Elvis, too?"

"What a sense of humor, friend. I'm in the line for the Beatles look-a-like reunion band, but I don't expect to come out with much. They never like my voice at these things," he said. "They're always looking for someone who looks a little cuter, more like Paul, to please the ladies. How's things with you?"

"Could be worse," He said with a shrug.

"Oh, I don't know about that," said the former Beatle. "I imagine this is about as bad as it *gets*. Kind of like what we used to call 'Hell,' don't you think?"

He looked into the dead eyes staring vacantly all around Him. A stench began to leak from their pores like blood; He retched and pulled out the sweet olive branch from His pocket, breathing in the fragrance like a man with emphysema struggling for his final hit of oxygen.

He was overcome with dizziness, and He felt the sidewalk melting under Him. He threw His arms out to break His fall but was held up by the thickness of the air. He closed His eyes until He was no longer lightheaded, then opened them slowly. Tears ran down His cheeks as His eyes burned from the brightness of the day. He realized then that Lennon was wrong about one thing.

The endless wait in the line was bad: it was Hell, no doubt about it . . . but there was something even worse. What if He actually *got* the job, and had to spend eternity impersonating Himself? ●

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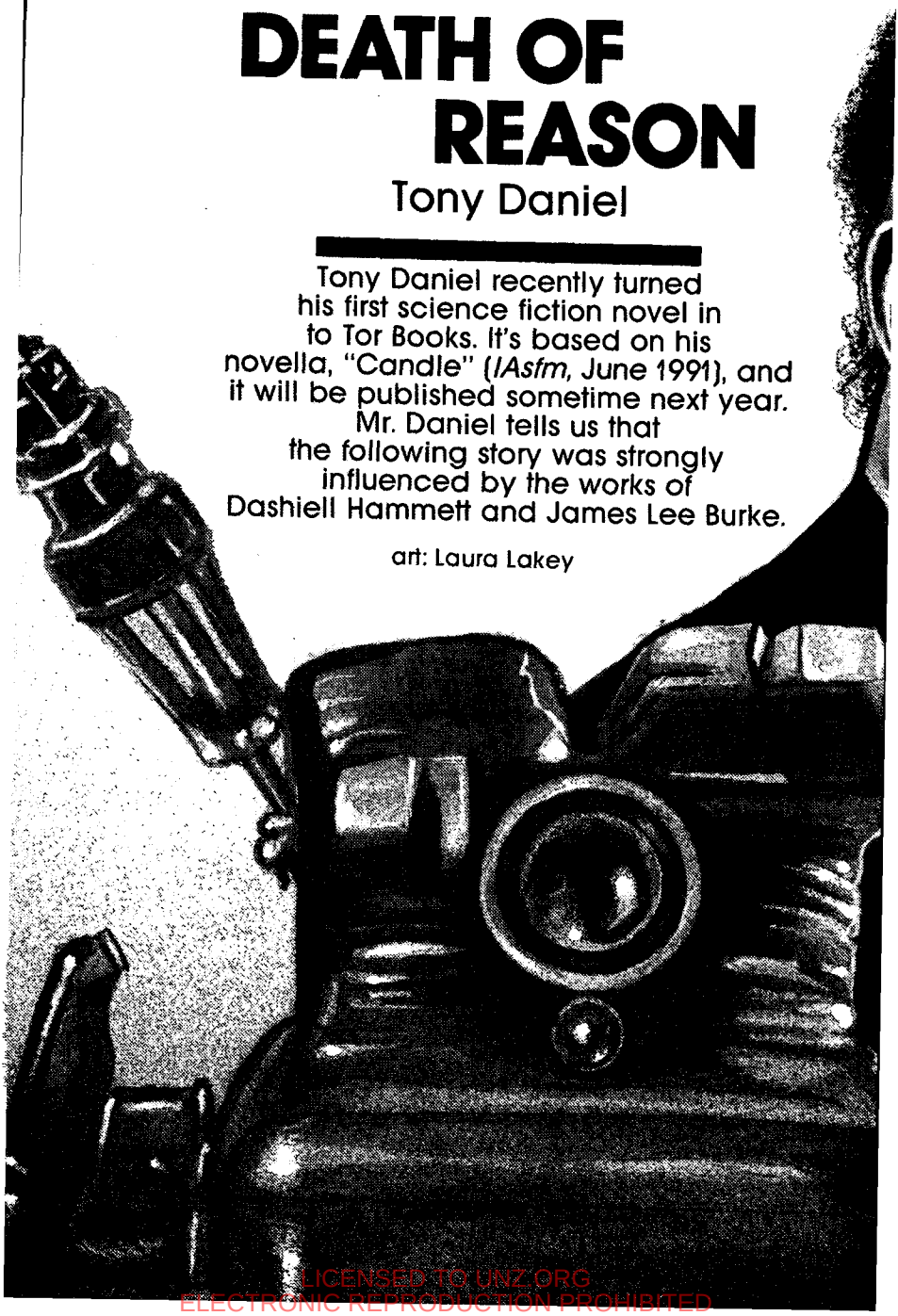
DEATH OF REASON

Tony Daniel

Tony Daniel recently turned his first science fiction novel in to Tor Books. It's based on his novella, "Candle" (*IAsfm*, June 1991), and it will be published sometime next year. Mr. Daniel tells us that the following story was strongly influenced by the works of Dashiell Hammett and James Lee Burke.

art: Laura Lakey



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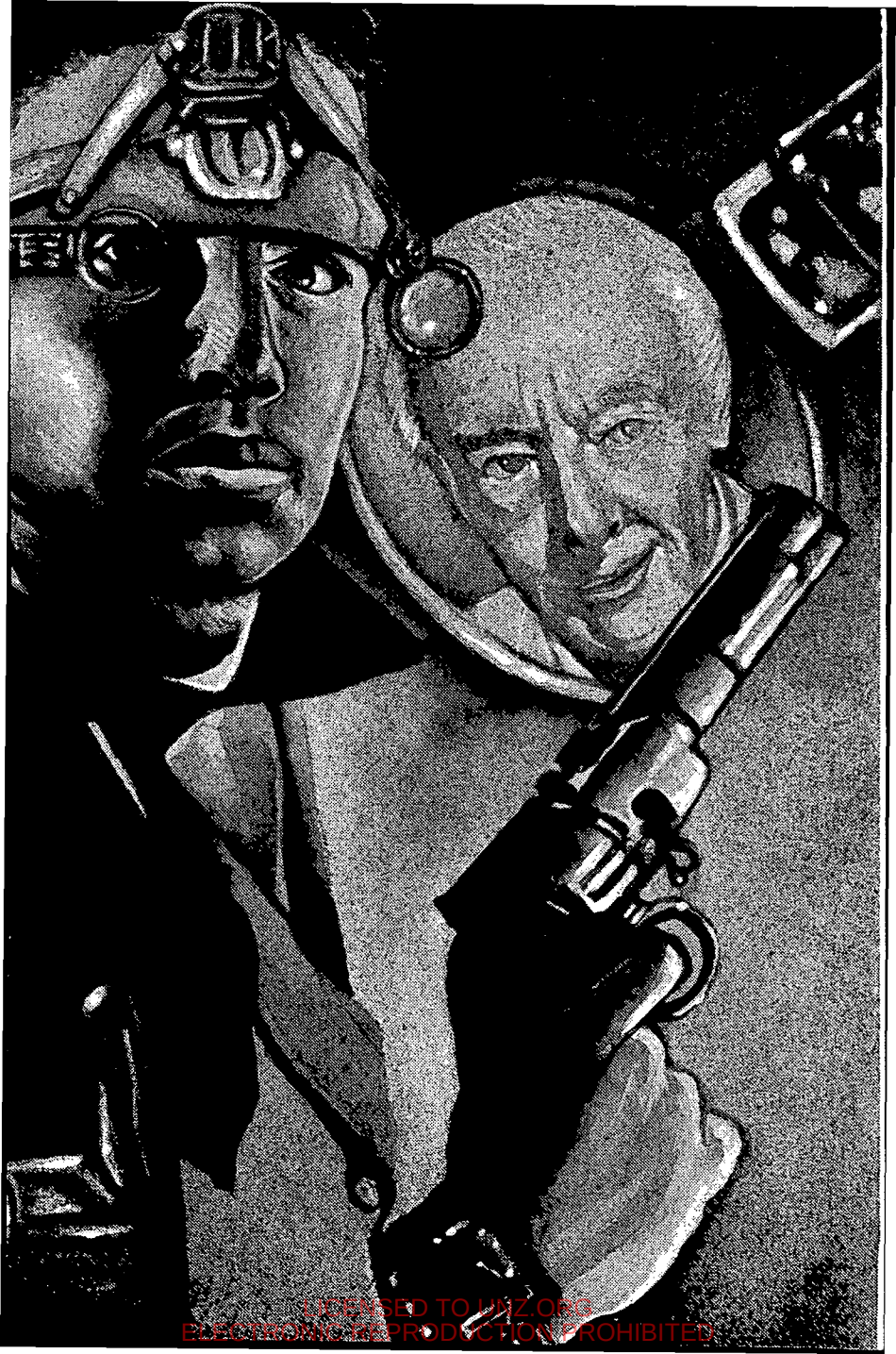

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1

The sky was liquid iron at sunset. The clouds were fiery slag. The scramjet carrying me home banked over downtown Birmingham on approach to the airport. Up on Red Mountain, the Vulcan's torch flamed scarlet for death—the beacon for another traffic accident sponged from the pavement of the city. Twenty-four hours of anonymous remembrance, then maybe the giant iron statue's torch would burn green until somebody else spilled himself out on the black asphalt. The custom was over a hundred years old now, but people kept obliging. I once knew the woman whose job it was to throw the switch on the light. I knew her well. Abby would always have work.

But Vulcan's torch would never burn for my grandfather. His timesharing license had expired on Maturicell two days ago. He died in his sleep. Peacefully. As they say.

The scramjet turned thrusters down and slotted into a bay at Municipal. Guide lasers flared in long lines of neon Morse code outside the window as the beams passed into and out of pockets of humidity. It was time to disembark, but I continued to gaze out at the sky full of fire and light. Twilight in the Heart of Dixie, bloody and wringing wet as usual. Welcome home, Andy Harco. Back to the city where you were poured and formed. Back to the grindstone that put the edge to your soul.

"You get too hot, and you'll lose your temper," my old friend Thaddeus the poet used to say. I guess that's what happened; that's why I left. I lost my temper in both senses of the word. But in Seattle, I'd hardened the edge once again. Birmingham no longer had what it took to dull me down. And I cut *back* now.

I snugged my op-eds onto my nose, then gathered my wits from under the seat and out of the overhead compartment. Along with my briefcase full of peripherals, I had a bag of toiletries, a plastic Glock nine millimeter, seventeen-shot automatic, and my good, blue interviewing suit and wingtips. I had not worn the suit for eight years, but I was reasonably certain it still fit. Granddaddy's funeral was tomorrow evening. I would have time to get it altered if it didn't. I had flown out of Seattle in gray shorts and a T-shirt with the faded hologo of a science fiction convention on the chest. People had given me strange looks back there, for Seattle was in the midst of a cold snap—the temperatures were hovering in the mid-fifties in August—due to some frigid air that had descended from the Arctic. I was, however, dressed perfectly for Alabama.

I felt like a returning tourist as I got off the plane. In a way, I was. I'd been on a long vacation from Birmingham. Eight years, for my health. That is, if I'd hung around eight years ago, a bullet would have just ruined the nice gray interior of my skull. And my health. At least, that's what Freddy Pupillina had told me—more or less—when he sent me the fistful of dead roses. Southern gangsters think they're so damn subtle and genteel. But they're not. Perfume on a skunk accentuates the stink even more.

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But that was eight years ago, back when I was a rookie rental for the Birmingham P.D. and an unlicensed fabulist. I'd had few friends, and an extremely abrasive manner. These days, I have more friends.

I wouldn't be seeing Abby, but Thaddeus was a friend. I would look him up after the funeral. It had been a long time since we'd gotten together in person.

I should have expected the snoops to pattern me as soon as I stepped off the jet. For the most part, the only people who travel in actual are high-level business jocks, Ideal coordinating nodes, rich eccentrics—and terrorists. Guess which profile *I* matched up with? I suppose I was preoccupied with thoughts of Grandaddy, maybe of Abby, so I wasn't paying a lot of attention. While I didn't plan on seeing Abby ever again, after seeing the Vulcan from the air, she was heavily on my mind.

The snoop interceptor was a Securidad 50 crank, maybe three or four years old. Cheap Polish bionics suspended in a Mexican-made shell. The City of Birmingham never had been exactly on the cutting edge of technology. I clicked up the 50's specs in the upper right-hand corner of my op-eds and gave them a quick glance. The 50's innards were standard bionic sludge. Its force escalator was knock-out gas, not a very thoughtful option for use in a crowded corridor, such as are found, for example, in airports. Those wacky Poles.

"Mr. Harco, may I have your attention," the crank said. The voice synth needed major adjustment. It was low filtering, and the thing sounded like a rusted-out saxophone. How could it get that grating nasal trill to come out when it didn't even have a *nose?* Ah, the mysteries of science.

I should have known, when the crank used my *name,* that something was afoot. Too used to being the observer rather than the observee, I guess. I was about twenty feet away from the gate, and the other passengers from the scramjet streamed around me as they headed for their separate destinations. I got some looks, and, goddamn it, some of them were looks of *admiration.* Idiot drones, respecting me because they thought I was a terrorist.

"What is it?" I replied through tight lips. I pointedly looked away from the 50. Who knows? Maybe the thing had enough brains to be insulted. I hoped so.

"Please accompany me," said the crank. Then red letters flashed across the periphery of my op-eds. *MR. HARCO, YOU ARE REQUESTED TO FOLLOW THE ROBOT TO AIRPORT SECURITY SCREENING. PLEASE COMPLY.* The font was crude, but 3-D. I have organic inner lenses in my eyewear—I don't skimp on any of my peripherals—and the words burned on the cellwork of my op-eds like lash welts.

This pissed me off considerably. Cowboying my virtual feed without permission or a court order—it's not done. At least, nobody does it to *me* and gets *away* with it.

I blinked twice and popped up my custom V-trace menu. It had cost

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me six thousand, a chip of my skull's parietal plate and a year of bureaupain to get a license for the junk. It was not my most expensive piece of exotic junk, but it was damned near. My brain is probably as much vat-formed gray matter as it is natural—and that's not counting the hardware interfaces.

I had no right to use the V-trace in the present circumstance, of course, but if this asshole who was cowboying me brought me up for review, he'd be asking for suspension along with me. Assuming he was a rent-a-cop to begin with. I had better *stop* making assumptions, I told myself, and start dealing with this shit.

I blinked the cursor to "ROOT AND BURN" with my left eye and closed both eyes to activate it. The message disappeared from my op-eds. I have good junk. Not the best. My junk is not really integrated into *me*, like that of the nodes and the rich. I couldn't make it work without op-eds. But my junk is quality stuff, when combined with my eyewear. Within a second, the status display spread across my field of vision, and iconed the real world into a little block in the lower right hand corner of the virtual.

SIGNAL ROOTED. FEED PROTECTED. BURN OPTIONS:
1. ORIGINATING DEVICE
2. ORIGINATING CONTROLLER
3. GENERAL BURN

I chose number 2, then iconed back to reality. The crank stood absolutely still for a long moment, and I stared at it. Somewhere, someone was receiving a nasty surprise in their eyewear.

The crank finally moved. It opened a door in its casing and extended a pink tube which looked for all the world like a shriveled penis. The crank sprayed knock-out gas like a scared puppy pisses. It seemed to dribble out. The chemicals probably hadn't been changed in years, and the crank was more electric than biologic, so it didn't have the guts to nurture complex chemicals indefinitely.

The gas *did* sublimate to some degree, however. Although, fortunately, the corridor was mostly clear, one of the gate attendants was walking by. The stuff billowed lazily about and after she got a whiff of it, she started to run away. Too late. She dropped onto the carpeted floor with a dull thump.

I, of course, have been filtered since Justcorp modified me at the Academy eight years ago. Justcorp does a first-rate job. It took the crank—or whoever was directing it—a moment to figure this out. It had been squirting me like I was a cockroach that was slow to die.

I walked over and made sure that the attendant was all right. Looked like she'd taken the fall on her side and was only bruised. No op-eds. As I felt her head to make sure nothing was cracked, my fingers closed around the feedhorn wart at the back of her neck. An optical bundle in a delta configuration. She was a node with fairly expensive hardwiring. Her brain belonged to another. I quickly stopped worrying too much about her well-being. Worrying about a node is like caring about the fate

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of a particular dead skin cell. And anyway, the Ideal would provide, or not, as it saw fit. I wondered, vaguely, which Ideal she belonged to.

Some of the others who were waiting on flights began to gather around the two of us. Idiots. What if I *were* a terrorist and were in need of a hostage?

"Mr. Harco," whined the crank. "We are prepared to activate all systems to persuade you to accompany me. Please accompany me."

Big vocabulary these security cranks have.

I said nothing, but nodded for the thing to lead the way. May as well get the check-out over with and be on my way. I was on personal leave, for Christ's sake, with specific instructions from management to stay out of trouble.

One nondescript corridor led to another, until we descended an airtube into the bowels of the complex. I felt like I was being swallowed. Security always seemed to pick the most cheerless locations for offices.

The duty officer's eyelids were charred, and he looked like a racoon, although his appearance wasn't that much different from what it had been before I'd burned his eyewear out, I was sure. Low-order security always wore those smoked plastic op-eds that look like windows into the black voids they have for souls. Or at least that they have for brains. This guy's own burned-out op-eds were laying, twisted and pitiful, on the desk before him. Yet even with the black eyes, I recognized the fellow.

Ed Bernam. Dandy Ed, we used to call him. He was a Guardian rental, and fit that agency's stereotype to a T. Big, vain, mean—and unable to control snot and fart production. Guardian's body mods on new employees were quick and cheap. The procedure adversely affected the guts and nasal tract.

Bernam picked his nose continually, but dressed well, as if he were trying to compensate for the shabbiness of his innards. He wore a blue and white uniform with a fully animated holo shield undulating on his chest. No wonder the airport couldn't afford state of the art cranks; it was dropping all its money on sparklies for the rentals. Or, knowing Bernam, he paid for his own.

"Hello, Ed. Front-line monitor still? Isn't this supposed to be a slot to break rookies' balls?"

Bernam scowled and sank back into the protection of his control chair.

"*Meander* Harco, what the hell are you doing in my airport?" he growled. He remembered me, evidently. Or at least remembered the fact that I hated my given name.

"Personal business," I replied with a neutral voice. I'd had my fun with him, and now I just wanted to get the hell out of there.

"We'll see," he said. "The junk has flagged you. I'm going to have to pull and comp your file."

"I'm not a terrorist, Ed."

"We'll see."

Shit. This was going to take time. Public security junk is notoriously slow compared to P.D. or private corporation. It still has to access central

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databases, for Christ's sake! And Bernam was going to run a full comparison, there was no doubt of that, even though there was not a reason on earth why a terrorist would get himself doctored up to look like me. I glanced around for a chair. There was none other than the one Bernam's fat ass was occupying, of course. That was the way of such offices. I set my suitcase and my briefcase full of peripheries down on the desk in front of him, further mangling his ruined op-eds.

Dandy Ed Bernam watched me through his racoon mask. I checked again to make sure it *was* him before me, wishing I were plugged into the briefcase. I had downloaded all of my long-term memory into a biostatic memory froth I'd paid a half-year's salary for. That's one reason I don't let the briefcase get too far away from me. I did it so as to have more room in the old noggin for junk interface algorithms . . . and other things. What was left in my brain were memories with cheated links and little redundancy. The guy who installed it—the best in the field—told me it was foolproof, nonetheless. And so far, I hadn't found any blank spots.

This was Bernam, all right. He'd been a two-year man when I came on with the Birmingham P.D. Most Guardian rentals stay on patrol, but Bernam had worked his way up to plainclothes. Someone had joked that he did it all so that he could dress the way he wanted to every day.

Whatever the case, he hadn't done well in Vice. Management had shuffled him around a couple of times before busting him back down to patrol. Ed couldn't take it, and broke his lease. Management was not exactly mortified to see him go, especially since Guardian refunded the deposit on him. But it seems the corporation got back at Ed for losing them money by contracting him out only to places with strict uniform requirements. No more fancy duds for *Ed*. Yet I could see that he still had his snot problem.

What I remember most about Ed is from the day before my arraignment. He was cleaning out his locker after breaking his lease. The locker was full of designer jeans. Ed liked to affect that he was big-time management in those days. He took the jeans out and neatly folded them, then stacked them in a vinyl bag—and appeared to be inventorying them as well. Ed acted like he didn't notice me as I got dressed in my blues, but he stopped with the jeans when I closed my locker door. He looked at me hard, and I stared back.

"What the hell do you think this is?" he asked me. "The twentieth century?"

I suppose he meant that I didn't understand the intricacies of the situation I had gotten myself into, the fact that a rookie did not step on toes—particularly toes as sensitive as Freddy Pupillina's and the Ideal to which he paid tribute.

The Birmingham P.D. and the Mafia had had a good-old-boy understanding for over a hundred years, and I'd stepped over the boundaries with my bust of Freddy for an assassination he'd been stupid enough to attend to in person. But that hit had stepped over *my* boundaries.

The poor guy he killed had been a bug junkie for years—just one of

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the burn-outs hanging out on 20th Street, with mental parasites eating their every thought almost before they formed it. When I was on patrol, I took a liking to this guy. He took care of stray dogs. His problem was that he had a big mouth.

This bugman just happened to look at Freddy wrong one day and say something stupid. The nanobugs had eaten the poor guy's soul like gas on styrofoam. *Fuck* the twenty-first century. Fuck the Family and its new and improved ways to hurt people.

Though of course I didn't say a damned thing to Bernam at the time, I gave his question some thought. I'm still giving it thought. Maybe this century isn't the one I would have chosen had I been given the option. Well, the fucking times had chosen *me*, and would just have to put up with my existence.

The airport junk took fifteen minutes to complete its report. Bernam had to listen to it aloud, since his op-eds were crisped.

"Meander Harco, age thirty, 6'0", eyes brown, hair brown, race mulatto." At least *this* voice synthesizer had the pleasant accent of a Southern woman. Made it easier to hear all the personal shit spoken aloud. But not *that* easy. "Born 12/21/65, Tuscaloosa, Alabama, contract birth, parents Julia Monroe Delacroix, mother, Marvin Harco 473A, father. Licensed cohabitation 3/15/85–12/22/88 with Abigail Wu Brimly, Birmingham, Alabama, no offspring. Education: graduated Banks High School, Birmingham—"

"Skip to the currents," Bernam grunted. He dribbled a little spit onto his chin when he spoke. It sat there for a while, glistening in a yellow sort of way. Finally he took out a paisley handkerchief and delicately wiped it away. Classy guy, Ed.

"Employed 2087–present by Justcorp Criminology. Leased since January 2089 to Seattle Police Department, homicide. Current departmental rank, Lieutenant. Licensing to follow: Grade 19 depth investigations, including virtual slayings. Section B coda use of harmful force, with an exemption in part 2, subparagraph 4 for bio-modifications in hands, elbows and torso." Which meant I had built-in brass knuckles—among other neat additions. "Option 4 for use of deadly force." Bernam smiled. He knew the kind of restrictions they had in Seattle for a license to kill. At Option 4, it was very doubtful that my junk could process the legalities of response in time for me to shoot back if someone were trying to blow me away. "License for 1) Remington angular electrochemical stungun, serial number on request. 2) Glock polymer nine millimeter automatic pistol serial number on request 3) Schrade two inch boot devices. 4) Bullard Forensics Portalab III 5) Archco Enchanced Op-Eds—"

"Fucking illegally modified—" Bernam muttered.

"With licensed enhancements 1)—"

"Fuck the enhancements," said Bernam. The junk was smart enough not to try and interpret Bernam's orders literally. It skipped to the next section.

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"F.A. license HARCO234319599 for genre constructions, science fiction."

"Huh?" said Bernam in his inimitable way.

"I write science fiction stories on the side," I replied. "Got a problem with that?"

"You're full of shit."

"Maybe," I said.

"Commendations, Official Evaluations, Resolved Offenses, and Unlicensed Activities. Warning: listing will take approximately twenty minutes for oral report."

"Skip it. Outstandings?"

"1/3/89, Dereliction of Duty, Birmingham Police Department, on Article six judicial expert system appeal. Review due 8/97."

"So," said Bernam. "Going to get sentenced soon?"

"Going to get cleared soon," I said. "You bastard." I said it without heat, and Bernam grinned evilly. I wasn't sure, but I thought he was wearing a thin coating of lipstick.

"Give me the comp," he told the computer.

The lights went down and the infrared came on. Sensors popped from the wall and shone darkly. Another five minutes passed. Finally the lights came back on and the junk spoke up. "Behavioral and somatic patterns: 97 percent match. Lacking genetic evaluation—"

"I refuse a scan under Section B of the Privacy Act," I said. It felt weird to be the one invoking a Section B. Usually I was having it invoked on *me* by some bad element who didn't want to be identified.

"Shut the fuck up," Bernam grunted. "Nobody asked you to."

"Lacking genetic evaluation, opinion tendered: This is Meander Harco."

"Satisfied?" I asked.

"Shut up."

"Ed, it's time you stop messing with me. I'm out of here in ten seconds unless you got reason to hold me."

Ed looked at me as if he were scrutinizing a strange insect. "I knew you were dark-skinned, but I never knew you were a *mule*, Andy," he said.

I stood still, expressionless. No. He wasn't worth it. "Now you do," I replied. I felt a great numbness grow in my gut, as if I were far bigger inside than I was outside. This was the way I felt before violence. Control. Hold on. My legal junk was spewing conflict options onto my op-eds. There were no options in my favor in this situation. Just for fun, I sifted the parameters through the Option 4 junk. It gave me the red flag. So. I could not legally kill him. Lucky Ed. This time.

"I've got a message for you, Andy," Bernam said. "Freddy Pupillina wants to talk to you."

For a second, I was nonplussed. Then this little shakedown began to make sense. Bernam was under orders from Freddy. Which meant all my previous legal evaluations were out of context and meaningless. Hmm.

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"You're mistaking me for somebody who gives a shit," I replied.

Bernam got real quiet. He was evidently not used to anybody refusing Freddy in such a cavalier manner. But it was true: he *was* mistaking me for somebody who gave a shit.

Bernam resolved his difficulties by pretending not to hear me. "Tomorrow night, around eight, at the Sportsman," he said. "You're free to go now."

"Tell Freddy I'm not coming," I said.

"Out," Bernam said. He closed his eyes and touched something on his chair. The chair spun around with its back to me. I stepped up to the desk where I'd laid my luggage and opened the briefcase.

"Ed, turn around."

He did not reply and continued facing away from me. I pulled out the Glock and slid the magazine into the handle. I felt it click into position, but the plastic was noiseless.

"Ed."

Still nothing. My legal junk was screaming, so I powered it down. I popped up a targeting menu, took aim, and fired the Glock into one of the chair's armrests. As I suspected, there was no security breach sensing in the home office. A perfect way for an airport to cut corners. Why would you need it where you have a permanently armed guard? The crank which had led me here stood immobile in the corner, unaware that anything untoward was going on.

Bernam was, at least, a bit more self-aware than the 50. He spun around with his hands over his head. "Jesus Christ," he whimpered. He tried to shuffle out of his seat and I saw that Bernam was even worse off than I'd thought. He was attached by a bundle of leads to the chair.

"Ed, you're bonded."

"Shut the fuck up!"

There was nothing I could do to him that was worse than what he'd done to himself. It was like being a node with none of the perqs—no sense of community, no mental health plan. It made me physically sick to comtemplate. An individual giving himself up to an Ideal, but staying *himself*. Like a dog dragging around a tick the size of an elephant. Only rentals desparate for *something* ever got themselves wired for bonding. I wondered what kind of shit Bernam had gotten into. Graft? Bugs? Booze? He would not meet my gaze.

"Tell Freddy that if he messes with me, I'll take him down," I said. "Tell him that." I pointed the Glock between Ed's eyes. This got him looking at me.

"Oh Christ," he said. "I can't without my op-eds, Andy."

"That's okay. You can tell him the old-fashioned way. You still have a link screen, don't you? Tell him I came to attend my grandfather's funeral, and then I'm leaving. I no longer take shit off bad elements. Tell him to stay the hell out of my way."

"Jesus, Andy—"

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"Will you tell him that?" I said. I touched the muzzle of the Glock to Bernam's nose. A little runny snot stuck to it.

"Okay, God, *okay*, I'll tell him!" said Bernam. He seemed sincere. I pulled the gun away and wiped the snot on his nicely starched uniform. I had to press hard to make it stick.

"Nice seeing you again, Ed." I put the Glock away and gathered my things, then walked out. Out of the airport, out into the sweating Southern night. The air, as always, had an ozone tang imparted by the huge biostatic plants downtown. And, as always, the fecal odor of bucolic acid from the plants mixed with the tang, so that the city smelled like a zombie might, decaying and electric.

Even at the airport, lightning bugs blinked in the air. They lived in the grass that grew through the cracks in the sidewalks. I ordered up a Hertz with my op-eds. It was an 87 Sagittarius, and the inductors rumbled like driveway gravel. Maybe I should have gone with one of the newer companies, instead of aging, traditional Hertz, but I liked the fact that all their electrostatics had the same lines as old gas-burning automobiles.

As the Saj drove me away, a couple of the fireflies smashed against the windshield, and their glowing belly-fire smeared in incandescent arches across my field of vision. If I hadn't known better, I would have sworn they were some glitch in the virtual manifestation. But I had my op-eds menued down, and the fireflies were real. For better or worse, I was in Birmingham, in the late twenty-first century, in the frail human flesh. More or less. The briefcase full of guns and brains sat by my side.

My fictional time-traveling detective, Minden Sibley, would have appreciated the juxtaposition of the old and the new on such a night as this. He was always flitting back a hundred years or so, going after fugitives on the Timeways or just taking a short vacation in days when you didn't have to have a license to take a goddamn dump. But he always had to return within a week, subjective. That was the First Temporal Law, ingrained into the fabric of his being by his employer, the United States Time Company:

1. A time traveller can never harm, nor by inaction bring harm to, the resonate period to which he is native.

You could go away for a little while, but you had to return and take your place as a tooth in the cogwheel that turned the universe when it was your turn to connect up with the Big Conveyor Belt in the Sky. Or whatever. It was all lies, I thought, I'd made them up myself, so what did it matter?

Granddaddy's death had made me maudlin, I decided. There is, however, no cure for self-indulgent sentimentality so sure and quick as going to see your *family*, the living ones, that is, in the flesh. I disconnected from the beltway a few miles from the airport, and drove my car down 1st Avenue North to the BrownService Mortuary. Mom's old Range Rover was parked outside. Harco, the bioenhancement company in which my father was a mid-level node, would not, of course, waste his work

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time by sending him to the viewing. Maybe he'd be at the funeral. Probably not. My father was a vague nothing to me and I didn't care. And I didn't particularly want to see Mom, either.

My mother is an amalgamation of just about every kook spirituality that ever aspired to Ideation. There are feedhorns dangling from her like fat remoras. Yet she is not a node. God knows why. Probably some kind of sick balance in her mind amongst a variety of pathologies. She's the one who gave me my first name, as if you hadn't figured *that* one out already. She was also the one who saved my ass eight years before. What can I say? I love Mom, but I don't *like* her very much. At least I don't like being around her any more than I have to.

I locked my briefcase in the trunk and went inside the funeral home.

Mom was out in the hallway, talking to one of Granddaddy's relatives whom I didn't know—which included just about all of them. I never had been into the extended family thing as a young man, though Mom had tried to get me interested in reversion genealogy at one time—that fad where some fancy junk supposedly deconstructs your DNA and gives you an op-ed presentation of life in Mesopatamia using your encoded racial memories, or whatever. Mom was convinced at the time that she was a Hittite princess and the rightful heir to the throne. I hated to point out to her that her inheritance nowadays consisted of a death zone of microbes which fried human beings as if they were insects caught in a zapper. The Middle East was no longer a pretty place, if it ever had been.

"Andy," Mom said, and disengaged herself from the relative to come and hug me. She smelled, as always, of cloistered eucalyptus. "I'm so glad you're here. Daddy will really be pleased to see you."

As I'd known she would, Mom had had a ghost made of Granddaddy. I glanced through the door and saw him, sitting by the casket and looking morosely at himself.

"Well," I said, and walked in.

Granddaddy was lying in his coffin, looking like he was made up for television. He was dressed in a gray suit that I'd never seen him wear. Mom had probably bought it for the occasion. He was a handsome man. He'd been a real looker in his youth, and the undertaker had obviously done some facial rejuvenation. Ironically, you can make dead skin look far younger than living skin, through some trade secret that I did not care to know or even guess at.

"I *did* live to a ripe old age," said the ghost softly.

"Yes," I said. I couldn't find it in me to be rude to the holoware. A first for me. But, however shallow and stupid, the thing was all that was left of the algorithm that had raised me and formed my *own* deep-down programming.

"I wanted to say something to you." The ghost said in a stiff voice, as if it were being forced into a sub-routine it did not particularly like, but was ordered to follow.

"Okay," I said. I didn't try to make eye contact. It wouldn't be the same, no matter how life-like they made the holo.

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"First, power me down as quick as you can."
"Mom won't like it."
"Convince your mother."
"I'll try."
"The other thing," he said, then was quiet for a moment, as if he were digging for something lost in his depths. But there *were* no depths to ghosts. "The other thing is, don't take no shit off nobody. Except poor folks who can't help it and don't know any better."
"I remember when you told me that," I replied. "I'll always remember."
The ghost looked relieved. He crossed his legs and turned back to looking at himself in the casket. "Almost one hundred fifty. A ripe old age."
I left the room after another minute or so. Mom tried to get me to stay at her apartment, but I needed to be alone tonight. Also I was a little worried about Freddy Pupillina looking me up, and didn't want Mom to get involved in *that* kind of shit. She had enough problems as it was.
I found a money crank around the block, and got some cash vouchers issued from my account. This would be the last traceable transaction I planned to make tonight. Just to be sure, I got out the Portalab and ran the voucher cards through a launderer. No real harm done, since they could be cashed at the Federal Reserve, but no more junk on them which could connect them to my account. Slightly illegal, but I made sure to do it away from the usual nano watcher patch points, and out of satellite view. Being a cop hath its advantages.
I checked into a motel in Bessemer, on the west side of town, far from the funeral home and my mother's place. The clerk—a crank (it wasn't a classy joint)—asked for I.D. when my voucher cards didn't produce an origination code. I showed it more fruits from the Portalab and it legally had to be satisfied. My room was dingy and I couldn't control the air-conditioning. The temperature was much too cold. Air-conditioning. The South was both the master of it and its slave. Nothing in the history of the region was more important.
That night, I dreamed of Abby. I often do. Nothing specific. Just her autumn hair, her slender fingers. Her breath. It always smelled like rain in leaves.

2

After the dreaming, I slept hard and woke up thinking I was in Seattle. Then I realized that not only was it freezing cold from the air conditioning, but the chilled metal of a pistol was pressed against my forehead.
"Mr. Pupillina wants to see you," said a voice from the darkness.
"Yeah," I said. "It appears that he does." That was when I jammed my stungun into where I estimated the voice had a crotch and pulled the trigger. I always sleep with a weapon.
There was a stifled whimper, a heavy thud, and the lights flipped on.

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A woman was standing by the door with the biggest damn flechette pistol I'd ever seen. It had to be one of the Danachek 7's I'd heard of. Nasty way to die. The bullets were said actually to *burrow*. On the floor lay a big, bearded man in a blue suit. His index finger was through the trigger guard of a big forty-five.

"How the hell did you know where I was?" I asked, by way of breaking the tension. The woman's tight expression did not loosen. She was heavy-set and dark-skinned in a dirty sort of way, maybe in her late forties. Ugly as ten-day-old roadkill. She, too, wore blue, with tiny pin-stripes that made her look fatter than she was, which was fat enough. Or big-boned, I should say, being a gentleman and all.

"Rental cars check in with their location every hour," she said flatly.

"Only to the cops," I said, then realized how stupid that sounded. In Birmingham, Freddy might not *own* the cops, but he sure as hell could get a little *favor* done for him—like a report on rentals.

"I hope this doesn't take too long. I have a funeral to attend," I said. The woman looked at me funny.

"So you already know," she said. I couldn't think what the hell she was talking about and finally decided she was talking about my *own* funeral, har, har.

She motioned me to get up. I had to step over Bluto on the floor to get to my clothes. She made me turn the briefcase toward her when I opened it. She reached for the Glock. So much for Plan B.

But I *did* have the rest of the alphabet to work with. I quickly slammed the briefcase shut on the woman's hand. She cried out in pain, but kept the flechette pistol leveled at my chest.

"Let go!" she said, fighting to control the hurt in her voice.

Instead, I twisted the briefcase as hard as I could and heard the bone in her arm break. She fired the pistol at me, point blank. Fire and agony in my chest. The force of the bullet knocked me backward, but I managed to hold on to the briefcase, and the woman and I tumbled to the floor together. Her face came down on the studded metal cup in my elbow. Again there was the cracking of bone. She rolled off of me, moaning. Her nose was a bloody mess. I kicked the pistol away from her and staggered to my feet.

After taking a moment to catch my breath, I lifted my shirt to inspect the damage. There was a hematoma on my ribcage. Through the rendered flesh and muscle, an exposed piece of my kevlar chest plates shone gray as old bone.

The flechette bullet lay at my feet, trying to burrow into the carpet's nap. This sight, and the grinding pain in my chest, fired a rage within me. I kicked the woman in the side as hard as I could. She stopped moaning and passed out. This gave me less satisfaction than I'd expected. These two were just Family muscle. They weren't *made*; their pain was their own. To hurt the Family, you had to hit a node. Like Freddy.

I gathered my things together and left the room. After I stowed them in the Saj, I opened the hood and found the sender box. Taking it out

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would leave me without traffic control. What the hell; I knew how to drive. I went to the trunk and found the tire tool. The box was full of bionics. It cracked like a skull and leaked gray-white nerve tissue and sickly yellow cranial fluid. While I was putting the tire tool back, the door to my room clicked open and Big-boned Bertha stumbled out. Her face was all bloody and she was obviously having trouble focusing well enough to find me. Nevertheless, I got in the car and got the hell out of there.

My first order of business was a patch job. I had to drive way the hell south to Hoover to find a booth that could handle skin grafts on the order I needed. It took an hour and a half to get me patched up. Funny how you either die or get better really fast these days.

The booth had my DNA match and it wouldn't be long before a sweep would root me out. Obviously Freddy cared enough to try, and had the kind of connections to succeed. I drove around aimlessly for a while, trying to match speed with the surrounding traffic so that I would not show up as an anomaly on the road control junk.

I pulled into a station for some static, and while the car was recharging, I went to the rest room and tried on my suit. I'd been wrong about it fitting. Over the last eight years, I'd put on at least twenty pounds, most of them in my chest and shoulders. At nine o'clock, when the cleaners opened, I took the suit in for altering. They put it in the nano tank and it was done in fifteen minutes. I paid with some damaged vouchers and headed in the general direction of the east side of town, toward the Church of Branching Hermaneutics, where Mom was holding Granddaddy's funeral.

But there was still plenty of time to kill before the funeral. I was dressed in the same shorts and T-shirt I'd worn yesterday, so I pulled into Eastlake and did five miles around the track. The lake was gorgeous in the mid-day sun, clean and full of fish, judging by all the anglers on the bank. Years ago, it had been a toxic cesspool, but the nanos had cleaned it up—just like the nanos in my shirt slurped up all the sweat and searched out and destroyed bacteria that made a stink.

On about the third lap, I got a decent snippet of plot for my next Minden Sibley time-travel mystery. Something about nanos eating up a body that had been sunk into a lake and Minden having to go back in time, before the murder, to make an identification. Maybe the plot could involve the Second Temporal Law. I hadn't done one of those for while.

2. A time traveller must not endanger his own atemporal existence in any way, unless by so doing he is fulfilling his obligations under the First Law.

It always makes for a thrilling moment when a time-traveller must decide between himself or the epoch which molded him. *He* can't exist without *it*, yet he *won't* exist if it *does*. Meaningless fun, though. Everybody knows time-travel is impossible.

When I finished up my run, I felt like I'd just stepped out of the shower. I drove around for a few minutes until I found a resistance booth on 1st

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Avenue North, then put in thirty minutes working the weights and getting the involuntaries shocked. It had been a good three days since my last workout, and this one left me tired, but with a clean feeling under my skin. Working out is the only way I know of feeling virtuous at no one else's expense.

To give the devil his due, I went over to the Krispy Kreme on 86th and had a donut and coffee. The place was over a hundred years old and run by some kind of historical trust. I was served by a node in a polyester waitress get-up from the last century. I'd have preferred an authentic foul-mouthed waitress in regular clothes, but they've all been replaced by cranks anyway. The donuts were good, though, and I sat with my coffee and considered times past.

I thought about a lot of things. Abby, mostly. The night I was running for my life from Freddy's goons. Mom had pulled some strings with one of her cults, and the Children of Gregarious Breathing were all set to smuggle me out in the Winnebago they used in their nomadic travels. They were on a holy search for the promised land of perfect atmospheric ion concentration or something, and no one questioned their comings and goings. Once out of town, Justcorp could take care of me. In town, my company's hands were tied by Freddy's maneuvering. There were two slots in the Winnebago. One for me. One for Abby.

Only Abby didn't *take* hers. She left me that night, in the midst of my need and terror.

We were on the Southside, standing by the onion-topped Greek Orthodox Church. We were to be picked up a block away by the Breath Children.

I told her I loved her, that I'd never loved her more than tonight.

"I know," she said. She looked at me as if she were full of infinite sadness, infinite wisdom. She was practicing to be a node even then. Abby, with her black hair and brown eyes. The fingers of her left hand worrying at the silver armlet she always wore above her right elbow. "I'm not coming, Andy," she said.

"What?"

"I'm not coming with you."

I should have realized. My fear kept the truth from my mind.

It was me or Birmingham for Abby. It always had been. Part of the reason I'd fallen in love with her in the first place was her devotion to principles larger than herself, her unselfish ways. She loved *cities*, and this city more than any. She'd majored in urban planning in college, while I'd been studying law enforcement. We met in a criminal-law class, moved in together after I'd got my rookie slot with Justcorp and she'd been hired to monitor traffic and to flip the switch on the Vulcan when it needed doing.

After all those long nights on the traffic watch, pondering the lights, losing herself to the ebb and flow of city life, she'd fallen out of love with me, and into love of another sort. The Big Lie had caught her, before I had known what it was, before I could do anything to help her escape.

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It was me or Birmingham, and Abby chose the city. She said that she loved me. She said that love for one man was not as important as love for humankind. She didn't want to give up her job at the Vulcan; she had made node. She hadn't wanted to tell me, knowing my distaste, even then, for Ideals. The city was going to wire her up in a week's time. She was in line to become the city's transportation coordinator, she said, to be on the Planning Council. In line to make a *difference*, to be something more than just one woman against the world. I could not believe what she was saying.

She had become one of those people who look right over you and don't see a person when they look *at* you, who are always thinking about how everything could be different, how everything can be *improved*. About how individual people are merely stepping stones on the road to perfection. And gazing into Abby's eyes, I could see that I was just a point of heat on a particular street corner. No more, no less. She was listening to the buzz of the everything so hard she could never hear me pleading with her to stay with me, to leave *for* me.

Abby kissed my numb lips and brushed her slender hand against my trembling face. Then I wondered, for the last time, how it was that she smelled like the rain. I swear to God she smelled like rain in the country. In green leaves. Maybe I've already told you that?

So I boarded the Winnebago alone, and didn't die. And I stayed a *person*. I can't say the same about Abby. My wife. Who was now the heart and soul of the city of Birmingham. Or at least the nerves.

"You make me look bad, son," said Freddy Pupillina as he settled his enormous bulk on a stool next to me in the Krispy Kreme. "Why you want to play so hard to get?"

I took a sip of my coffee before I answered him, and scanned the restaurant. There was Big-boned Bertha at the door. Her nose was healed, but something about it didn't look *right*, as if she'd turned out so ugly in the first place, her cells had purposely forgotten how to reconstruct her.

"Oh, I don't know," I replied. "Maybe it has something to do with your trying to take my badge and your running me out of town on a rail?"

"Old news."

"I have things to do, Freddy, a funeral to go to. Leave me alone."

Pupillina took one of those pauses that nodes take when they are receiving instructions from the Ideal. A kind of integration. I took a moment myself to look him over. He hadn't changed much since the day I sprayed mace in his eyes and kicked him in the balls. Perhaps he was bigger, if that were possible, with tinges of gouty jaundice in his eyes and fingernails.

"I'm sorry about your grandfather," he said. "The Family sends its condolences."

"Fuck the Family," I said calmly.

Pupillina did not react with anger. He did not appear to have instructions on just *how* to react to such a statement, so he continued with his spiel.

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"For each of us, the time finally comes when we can no longer contribute as much as we are forced to take, when—"

"My grandfather was worth more than all of your damn Family put together," I said. "Will you cut the shit and tell me what you want, Freddy?"

"I'm just trying to be civil," he grunted. He looked morose, as if all his effort were for nothing. It was.

"I'm going to get up and walk out the door," I said. "If that creature of yours tries to stop me, I'm going to rip her fucking nose off again and shove it down her windpipe."

I threw some vouchers down for the coffee and donuts and started to stand up.

"Thaddeus Grayson is dead," Pupillina said.

I sat back down. "What?"

"He's *been* dead for three weeks now."

It hadn't been in the papers. None of our mutual friends had called me.

"What do *you* have to do with it, Freddy?"

"I—that is, the Family—came into possession of the body."

Thaddeus dead. It was true. Pupillina had no reason I could discern for lying. I tried to take another drink of my coffee, but all I got were the bitter dregs. Thaddeus was the oldest friend I had, maybe the best.

"How?"

"Blast job," Pupillina replied. "Something fucking blew his mind."

"God."

"It was a slow burn. Whoever did it wanted something. It must have been agony for the poor son-of-a-bitch."

"Who did it, Freddy?"

I was going to kill them. Option 4 or no Option 4. Thaddeus had taught me everything I knew about writing. And a hell of a lot about living a worthwhile life.

"Good question," Pupillina said. "We don't know."

"Piss in orbit."

"Honestly, we don't. He was accidently dumped outside of one of our establishments."

Like hell he didn't know. But for some reason, he was being adamant. "Why are you telling me this?" I said.

Pupillina smiled horrendously. Even his teeth were yellowing. "How'd you like that dereliction of duty charge against you dropped? How about that, Andy?"

"I'll win the case."

"Maybe. What if it were to be like it never happened?"

"What are you saying?"

"We need you to find out who killed Thaddeus Grayson."

"*You* are trying to bribe *me* to be a snoop?"

"The Family needs an outsider on this one. Somebody with no, uh, leanings toward any one part of us, if you know what I mean."

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"Somebody who hates all of your guts equally and indiscriminately?"

"That's it."

"It's out of my jurisdiction."

"Oh, I've already arranged to have you temporarily assigned to homicide here in Birmingham as specialist labor."

"Justcorp cleared this?"

"It did."

"I'll be damned."

"Yes. So?"

"Why Andy Harco? Isn't there somebody else you could rain on?" But I was already planning the investigation. First, I'd have to talk to students and faculty where Thaddeus taught . . .

"You knew him."

"Eight years ago."

"You've kept in touch through virtual."

"How would you know that, Freddy? That's illegal information for an unlicensed civilian."

"Don't be juvenile, Andy," said Pupillina. "I've got a federal license to conduct certain virtual taps." He looked rather indignant on the matter, as if he were a man unjustly accused. He just didn't get it that I thought he was scum, and that I was *never* going to just go along with things because "that's how they were," or whatever other fucking excuse a bad element gives for hurting other people.

"So, will you take the job? We're going to double your salary while you're working in Birmingham. We know you like to buy little doo-dads for yourself."

"How generous."

"Think nothing of it."

"I will."

Pupillina stood up with a great sigh and rustling of clothing. He sounded like a capsized ship righting itself.

"Freddy," I said, neither standing nor looking up at him, "why'd you send the goons? You could have just *told* me this."

He hesitated in answering for a moment, then snapped his lapel and smoothed down his navy jacket. I wondered what designer made blue jeans big enough to fit around that huge ass. "I was trying to give you a gentleman's welcome," he replied in a regal tone. What an affected asshole. The Italians had come to Alabama to work in the mines in the early 1900s, a little too late to be princes of cotton and land.

He was feeding me bullshit anyway, but I wasn't going to get anything else out of him on that one.

"Where is Thaddeus's body?"

"In safe-keeping. But we're going to have to let it be discovered tonight. He was due to give some reading that he never misses tomorrow—"

"Southern Voices. At UAB." It was where Thaddeus had first made a name for himself.

"Whatever."

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"You're the picture of cultural refinement, Freddy."

Pupillina sniffed, a great rancid, snotty sniff, then continued, "So he's going to be found, and he'll be in the morgue for you to look at tomorrow."

"Okay."

"Have we got a deal, then?" Pupillina said. He held out his hand. He should have known not to do that. Christ, what a loser.

"Freddy, if my junk ever told me it was legal, I'd blow you away in a second. If I had a chance to mace you again, this time I'd stick it up the hole in your dick—if you still have one. I know who and what you are, Freddy."

He dropped his hand. "We have a deal," he said, and walked away. Or maybe *slid* would be a better way of describing it. Big-boned Bertha followed him out the door, and I was alone with my thoughts once again in the Krispy Kreme. I remembered the first conversation Thaddeus and I had had, in a bar on the Southside.

"I'm going to get this city down in words," he said to me. "I don't give a damn how low I have to sink or how high I have to fly, I'll do it."

"Why?" I asked. "What's so important about *Birmingham*?"

"I fit into this city, like a key. I can open it up and find a passageway, man. Find the *way*."

"To what?"

He looked at me, ran his stubby fingers through his beard. "That's the question, ain't it? When I find out, I'll let you know. You'll be the first, okay?"

Thaddeus let us all know, one poem at a time. I ordered another cup of coffee and stared into it until the time came to go to change clothes and attend my grandfather's funeral.

Mom greeted me at the door of the church. She was dressed in one of those iridescent-black grief shifts which are supposed to absorb the alpha emissions of all the nearby mourners and display them in dark patterns across the weave. Mom's wasn't too lively, for there weren't a whole lot of people at the funeral. Granddaddy had kept pretty much to himself these last few years, and before—before he'd licked his drinking problem—what friends he'd had were buddies from the tavern. No close friends. Aquaintances, family. Cousins, creaky old contemporaries, their sons and daughters. Grandma had died before I was born. Mom was her and Granddaddy's only daughter. And I the only grandchild.

We went up front to view the remains one last time, and Mom broke down. Her dress created some interesting swirls as she cried. In keeping with her ecumenical style, Mom had not used the Branching Hermaneutics clergy, but had gotten a Brother Christopher, a whiff of a fellow from the Children of Gregarious Breathers, to conduct the service. He held her hand to comfort her.

"He was so handsome," Mom said. "My father was a handsome man."

I could not but agree.

We took our seats in the first row, and the Breather started the service

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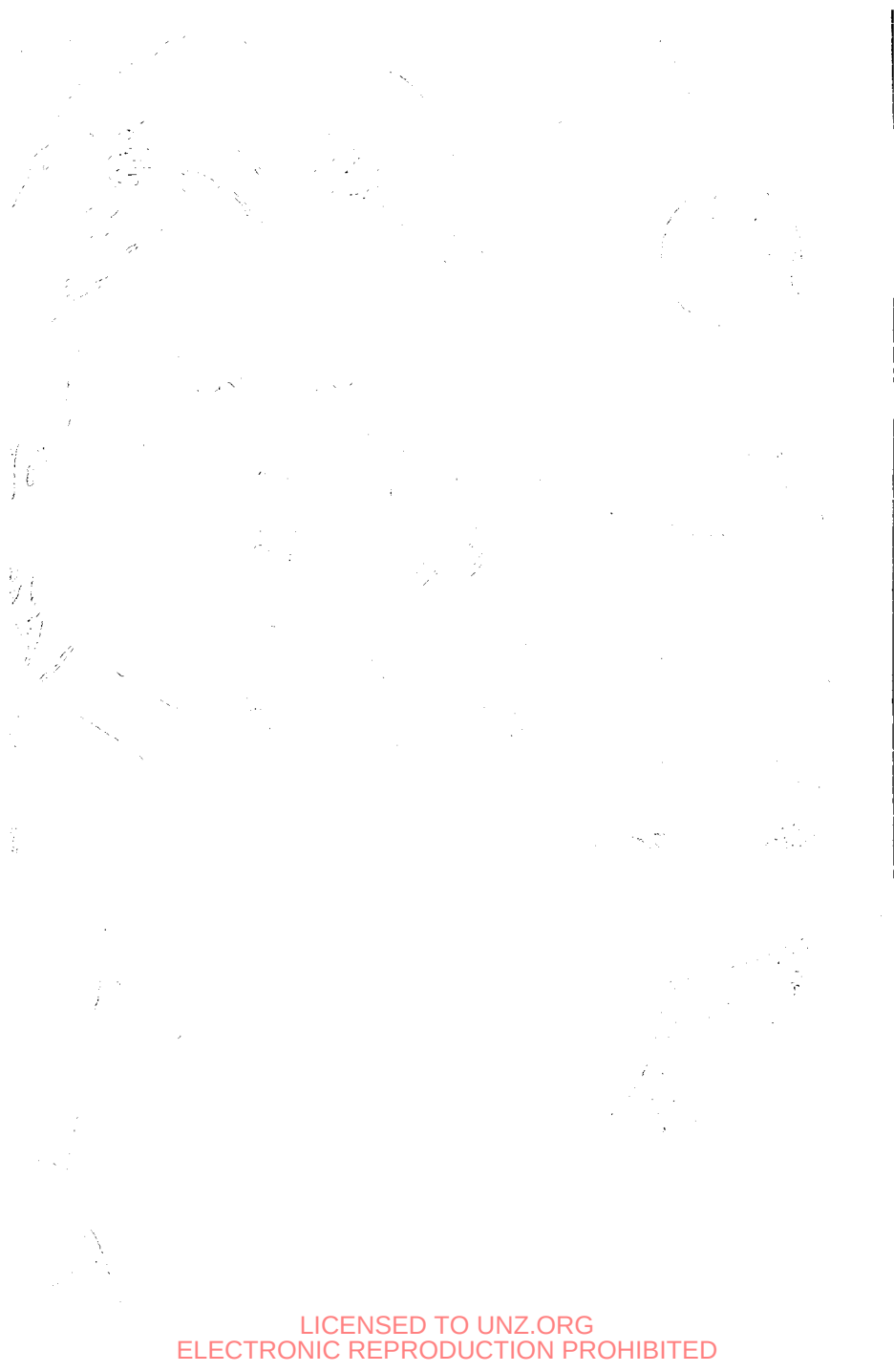

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with a prayer to whatever god of human potential his ilk had faith in. Granddaddy would have snorted in derision, but he'd also told me once that I should let Mom do anything she wanted for his funeral. What the hell difference would it make to *him* after he was dead?

So I sat through it. But despite Granddaddy's stated wishes, I felt like saying something. I felt like giving a proper rest to this man who had shaped me more than any other. When the Breather paused in his homily, I motioned to him that I had something to say. He affected not to notice me, so I stood up and walked to the front. Mom let out a little gasp, but appeared resigned to letting me have my way. I stood in the pulpit and the Breather introduced me with a nervous smile, then sat down behind me.

The crowd shuffled around expectantly. They all had on ill-fitting suits and dresses. Working people. Elements like Pupillina would think of them as shnooks, as cattle.

"My granddaddy wasn't much of a church-goer," I said. A few in the congregation frowned at this. I heard Brother Breather huff behind me. "But he always spoke of the Old Master, of how he was raised in that Primitive Baptist home out in Brookside. He was a man of God in his way. . . ."

What was I trying to say? Granddaddy hadn't been to church in fifty years. Until he kicked the bottle, Sundays were six-beer mornings.

"His father worked the coal mines, and Granddaddy went to work in the iron foundries when he was sixteen, as an electrician. When the biostatic plants came in, he wired the broths."

This was going nowhere. My grandfather had survived, adapted. He was no hero of the masses. He had precious little ambition, except to lead a good life and not to hurt anybody. When it was clear that his drinking was devastating Mom, he'd given it up. Just like that. No treatment centers, no twelve steps, no phenyl therapy. It was a damned gutsy move.

"Granddaddy was the quintessential Southern city man. He was wild and he was loving. He was low-down and he would do anything for you. I've never known a better man. If I can be more like him, I'll count my life well-lived. But we won't see his like again."

Here my voice caught in my throat. Anyway, that was all. It was enough. I sat down and the Breather concluded the service with some inappropriate reflection on how we should all be grateful to the government for contracting out Maturicell for our senior citizens, so that even the poor could experience better living through virtual.

Afterward, a couple of relatives or old drinking buddies—I didn't know which—told me that they appreciated what I said, and that they, too, had been getting sick of the "preacher's" nonsense. They asked me if I wanted to go get shitfaced with them—well, not exactly in those words—but I politely turned them down.

Mom was having Granddaddy cremated, then shot out of a large air cannon that the Breathers operated somewhere in Tennessee. That was one ceremony I was going to miss. They say that the ashes are eventually

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distributed around the whole earth uniformly throughout the stratosphere, but I like to think that the particles don't get that high, or if they do, they come back down again. I like to think that when it rains these days, it's raining ancestors.

"Why don't you stay at the apartment tonight?" Mom asked me. "I have a great deal to do this evening, affairs to arrange." She didn't wait for me to answer, but looked around, spotted the mortuary crew, and waved them over. "Here's the key. I'll see you later."

I took the plastic key and pocketed it, while Mom steadfastly walked away to do whatever duties her scattered brain had created for her. It had always been like this with her. She was a combination of steel resolve and will-o-the-wisp notions. I thought of her as a metallic butterfly bashing about in the flowers. She'd saved my ass more than once, yet I had difficulty being around her. I loved her. But you don't have to *like* someone to love them.

I went back out to my car and breathed out an attempt my body was making to cry. The night was just falling, and a storm was building to the west, where most storms come from in Alabama. Under the storm, the sun had set, but the sky was still burning deep red, like a very slow, very hot fire. The storm cloud spread over this brightness like black oil. Lightning bolts, staying in the air, curled into and out of the cloud, like quicksilver worms. And all of this fury was the backdrop to dozens of flashing biostatic towers, gridding the city for as far as the eye could see. The air smelled like tar and mowed grass. It was sultry hot and full of electric possibility. You could almost believe the city was a living thing on an evening such as this.

"Well, son," said a voice—*his* voice—and I nearly jumped out of my skin. It was the ghost, standing beside me, smoking a cigarette exactly as Granddaddy used to. I expected the smoke to curve to the edge of the projection parameters, then abrubtly fade out. Instead, it swirled away into the air and I would almost swear I could *smell* it. I looked around and saw two lampposts where a couple of holoprojectors may have been, creating the image. "It's almost time for me to go," said the ghost.

"Mom's not keeping you, huh?" I tried to suppress the feeling that this actually *was* my grandfather. The physical reproduction was excellent. Ghosts had gotten a lot more sophisticated since I'd last been to a funeral.

"She don't need me. She never really did."

"Yes, I guess she's got her religions. Or they've got her."

The ghost took another puff, coughed. Jeez, this thing was life-like! Or is that "death-like"?

"Now, don't underestimate her, Andy. We were all of us too hard on her."

I took a breath, looked out at the last embers of the sunset, looked back. "I guess you're right," I said.

The ghost dropped his cigarette with a quarter-inch left to the white paper, and didn't bother to grind it out. Exactly like Granddaddy. "I want you to do something for me, son."

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"What?"

"I want you to *get* those bastards. I want you to get them all." The ghost's eyes shone like black coal in moonlight.

"Who are you talking about, Granddaddy?" I asked, not able to catch myself before I spoke his name.

"The ones who did this to me," he said quietly.

What? I started to ask. But I knew the answer to that. I'd half-known all along. The storm was breaking in the west, and lightning began to snake to the ground. "I will," I told my grandfather.

While I was watching the storm, the ghost faded away. Before I got into my car, I noticed something on the ground. It was a cigarette butt. Probably just one that had already been laying in the parking lot. But when I knelt to pick it up, it was warm.

The next morning a crank street cleaner discovered Thaddeus Grayson's body protruding from a storm drain near Five Points South. Police speculated that the deluge of the previous night had washed it there from wherever it had originally been dumped.

3

I had spent the night before at Mom's place, where she'd fixed up my old room for me. She'd used it for various kinds of religious networking for years, and the place smelled heavily of patchouli, a scent it had never had when I was a kid. Mom came in after I had already gone to bed, but I could hear her in the kitchen. Despite her avowed disbelief in grief, she was quietly crying.

I got up and went to the kitchen. I took a paper towel from the dispenser there and got some milk from the pantry. I sat down at the table, across from Mom, and said nothing. The carton of milk quickly warmed in my hand as the heatpumping nano activated and cooled the insides.

Mom sniffed a few more times, wiped her nose on her nightgown, then looked around for something on which to dry her eyes. I handed her the paper towel.

"Daddy was so handsome today," she said. "That was what he looked like when I was a little girl."

"Yes, he was."

She used a corner of the paper towel to delicately dab her eyes. After a moment's struggle, she regained her composure—or closed herself off to true feeling once again, depending on how you look at it.

"I suppose you want his ghost turned off?" she said.

"You know I do."

She looked at me, but not like Abby had that night. Mom may have been a ditz, but she was a *living* ditz.

"How did I produce such a hard-hearted offspring?"

"I don't know, Mom."

"I mean, look at the kind of person I am. I have *faith*, Andy. Faith in

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things to come. I believe in keeping love alive as long as possible. Don't you want at least *some* part of Daddy to survive into the better world that's coming?"

I shook my head. Useless to explain, yet still I always tried. "Even if there is a better world coming, Mom, Granddaddy is *dead*. That ghost is like a comic strip version of him. You know that."

"I know that even a *caricature* is better than nothing," she said.

"For *you*, Mom. Not for *him*."

"Can't you have even a little faith, Andy?"

"No. I can't."

"Well." She suppressed another sniffle, then stood up. "Good night."

"Good night, Mom."

She went off to bed, and I sat at the kitchen table and finished my milk in silence.

In the morning, I headed into the heart of the city, to the biostatic plants and the hulking infrastructure of what was officially known as the University of Alabama at Birmingham, UAB. What the letters *really* stood for, everyone knew, was The University that Ate Birmingham. It encysted the south side of the city like a kudzu takes a tree.

In the mid-twentieth century, the iron mills had dominated the landscape, but by the 1990s, they were heaps of rust. Twenty years later, come the biostatic revolution, grossly cheap energy, *et voila*—all the towns that had big medical centers became the centers of money and power in the world. Birmingham—after years of a massive inferiority complex—had finally got a leg up on Atlanta in the region. UAB had been a bio mecca for years.

But once again Birmingham had blown it by concentrating all of its hopes in one industry. Biostatics is old tech now, just as iron had become a century earlier—a tech that is waiting to get picked off by some hotshot genius. And the bio-waste, nasty as shit because it *is* shit, deepens. Good old Birmingham was destined to become a second-rate town all over again. Or maybe the Ideals, so much more intelligent and far-seeing than the leaders of the past had been, would save us. And if you buy that, I've got a near-earth C-based asteroid to sell you, dirt cheap.

The plants are massive and bright, even in broad daylight. They shine and flash like giant test tubes full of neon gas, though what they are really filled with is reactive biomass—soybeans, pond scum, and human feces. They have a certain gross beauty.

I left my car in the parking garage at UAB and walked the few blocks to Five Points South. As I'd hoped, The Betablocker was still there, in all its shabbiness. Thaddeus had had an apartment over the bar, and had practically lived in the bar's murky confines, frequently taking his meals there, such that they were. Even back when I knew him, he'd been a long-time fixture in the establishment—so much so that the proprietor had given him a cigarette lighter emblazoned with the Blocker's crest: A skull with the international nil sign encircling and bisecting it. What did it mean? No heads allowed? No thinking? That last was more likely.

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I went inside. The bartender was not a crank, but a young woman, probably a student. Old-fashioned joint. I didn't recognize her, but I did stare at her for a moment. Here in Birmingham, it was common for two mulattos to meet, but not in Seattle. In fact, it hadn't happened to me in eight years. She saw me, saw what I was staring at, and gave me a smile. Not a node. I ordered a beer.

All the bars these days had nano-breweries, but the Blocker had an old-fashioned glass-windowed instant fermenter behind the bar. I watched the barley turn to brew before my eyes. Then it circled through some refrigeration—an old unit, with freon, not nanos—where it collected in a pool, awaiting consumption.

My tawny bartender drew it into a mug and brought it over to me. I did my duty. Not bad for the Bible Belt. A little bitter going down, but bitter suited me.

"You sure got rid of that fast," said the bartender. "Want another?"

"Sure."

She set the machine to work, then leaned on the bar near me. "I'm Trina," she said. I looked at her more closely. The smile was still there, but there was something haggard about her face, something sad.

"Andy Harco. Pleased to meet you."

She fidgeted a moment, having nothing else to say, I guessed—or else wanting badly to say something, but not knowing how. Then the beer saved her. She went to get it for me.

"You been here long?" I asked, when she returned.

"Uh, no. Well, almost a year now. I guess that *is* long."

She began to absently rub the bar with a towel. Her fingers were long and supple. She was gripping the towel very tightly.

"Know a guy named Nestor Greenly?"

"Nope."

"He used to tend bar here. Long time ago."

"Yeah?"

She gave the bar a final swipe and put the towel away, then started to drift away. She was humming something slow and soft.

"I used to live in Birmingham," I said.

This got her attention. "Where do you live now?"

"Seattle."

"Really? There's a guy who comes in here— . . . *came* in here. He knows a cop in Seattle he's always talking about."

"I'm him."

"Yeah." She looked at me appraisingly. "You are, aren't you?"

"You heard about Thaddeus?"

"I heard. I don't know what to think."

"Did you like him?"

She was crying now, softly. "I didn't love him," she said. Then I understood.

"How long were ya'll together?"

"No," she said. She knelt and got the bar towel again, then wiped

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her eyes with it. "You've got it wrong. We weren't together. We just . . . once."

"I see."

"But he was here every day. He lives upstairs, you know. *Lived.* I haven't seen him for *weeks* though." She said the last with a measure of acrimony.

I sipped my beer. Another customer came in and Trina went to wait on him. He ordered a whiskey sour. It was nice to see a real human being mix a drink. Somehow it was more graceful than a crank, and I'll bet the guy got a stiffer drink. After she'd finished, she came back over to me.

"Can I see his apartment?" I asked.

"The police have been up there," she said. "They have it sealed off."

"I *am* the police, Trina."

"Oh. Well. Then I guess you can." She reached under the bar and pulled out her purse. She searched around in it until she came up with a plastic key. It went with a cheap lock, no doubt, with magnetized junk. I could have opened it in two seconds without her help. But the thought counted.

There was a P.D. spiderlock on the door. It ate a couple of skincells off my finger and let me use the key. Thaddeus's place looked like the back room at a shoe store after a big sale. It always had. He kept things in boxes; the only furniture he owned was a bed and a desk. He had no link screen to write on, no unlinked computer either, and I knew, from asking him, that he didn't work in virtual.

He wrote on *paper*, with the self-recharging nano pen I'd given him years ago. I'd gotten it off a bad element who wouldn't be needing it anymore. One of Thaddeus's favorite tricks was to stick it into the toilet to feed the nanos. This apartment still had liquid plumbing. I set my briefcase on the bed, and looked around.

The pen was on the desk, next to a pile of paper. New poetry, maybe. The place smelled of cigarettes, dust, emptiness. I sat down in the desk chair. It squeaked, but in a wooden, comforting way. The local guys had obviously been through the place. I'd scan their report later. I'm sure that Freddy's hired help had combed it as well. I didn't expect to find anything.

I wasn't even sure what I was doing here. I picked up a poem. Thaddeus's chicken scratch was almost impossible to read. Like ancient Hebrew, vowels were merely a line, and you had to guess from context. There were mark-outs, added lines, intense revisions. No title on this one.

Then the sadness finally hit me. I laid the poem back down and sobbed once, wiped a tear. *This* was it. The last of Thaddeus Grayson. Ink on paper. He had been my friend.

We didn't stay in constant touch over the years, but got together every few months in virtual, found some out-of-the-way algorithm to get jangled in. He was into edge music, and lots of times we'd sit in on this or

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that band that was supposed to be fresh kill. When I'd first met him, back when I was a rookie rental, he'd been trying to make it in an edge act called Strategic Magnificence. They made rock-and-roll influenced vibes with some lunar tonic imagery and, for spice, Afro-Hispanic mambito rhythms. It wasn't great stuff, but the lyrics were hot. Thaddeus wrote them all, of course. Most of the time they played at the Betablocker.

P.D. stormed the place one night looking for headjunk, and I'd arrested him for minor possession. We had a fascinating conversation about science fiction on the ride back to the station. Thaddeus read it, and was even writing some of it back then, as was I. That was before his debut at Southern Voices, before his first poems hit big in *Yardworks* and every licensing program in America wanted to give him instant tenure.

After I'd seen him through the paperwork, and got him on-line with the best defense junk I knew at the time, we went back to the Blocker for a beer. The defense junk got him off with a week of public service, which he worked off the next few days by riding around with me as patrol ombudsman. What a weird-assed combination *that* was! But we got along, and I introduced him to Abby. This was before she and I were married.

Abby and I turned into his first listeners after that. We'd go out drinking, or he'd come over to our place (after she and I *had* a place) and read us his latest. We'd either critique it or tell him it was great. But it was *all* great. Better than anything else being written. I knew it, and even *Thaddeus* knew it, but he had a hard time believing that he was *that* good.

Christ, he could make words sing! He did not see the world as you or I, but in infinitely finer texture and variety. It wasn't so much that he had a different perspective on things, but that he seemed, rather, to embody *all* perspectives in his work. A complete writer. God knows, I've tried to imitate him, but my best work is a pale shadow, stark black-and-white in comparison to his infinite subtleties of tone. It was always impossible for me to be envious, however. How can you envy a natural force come into the world? It just *is*.

Over the years, he had taken on the physical presence to accompany his work. Thaddeus had grown, like a rock taking on moss, and lately had become an immense man. Yet the bulk seemed to be padding instead of fat, a patina of years observed. He was not a rotund, jolly fellow, but imposing. He'd been raised down in scrappy Gulf Shores, Alabama's redneck riviera, by an itinerant mother who was a waitress, *when* she was working, and he'd always retained the air of a street kid.

But no longer.

Thaddeus was gone. Cut off in his prime.

I shuffled through the other papers. More poems, a letter from a fan, a grade sheet with the names of his students. I scanned in the list, then picked up another poem.

This one was more readable.

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Upside down, the leaf supports the tree
~~the all supports the me.~~
Bricks, stones, walls
Quills, pens, porcupines
Death and life everlasting
together again for the first time

Obviously notes and scribblings. Then under all of this a line from Wallace Stevens:

The only emperor is the emperor of ice-cream.

The paper wasn't dated, but I knew that Thaddeus periodically swept everything on his desk into a box, so the line had to have been written relatively recent to his death. Which didn't mean that it was worth a damn to me.

I sat there for a long time and stared at the other papers, at the grain of the desk. It was made of real wood. Thaddeus, my friend, would never write here again. I remembered the last time I'd seen him, three months ago, in virtual. We'd taken a pathway that was not quite legal down to a bar on the underside of the City—the *virtual* City that was the setting for the meeting of minds across America. The bar had junk in place that bypassed your normal tactile filters. A band called Metastasis of the Liver was pounding out some edge—and in that bar, *pounding* was what happened to your nervous system. Thaddeus hadn't talked much, had complained about his work needing a jolt.

"Maybe I'll get out of Birmingham," he said. "Maybe I'll get out of the South, even."

"You? Man, you are in a symbiotic relationship with that city. There's no way you'll leave."

"Yeah, well, I'm a little worried about it becoming parasitic, you know what I mean?"

"Like how?"

"Like all my poems are full of shit smells and air-conditioner hum. I can't get those damned biostatic plants out of my imagination. I don't know. People tell me Thaddeus is good for Birmingham. I don't know if Birmingham is good for Thaddeus anymore."

Then the band kicked in and blasted away all intimacies of conversation, imagined or real. By the time the set was over, we were both too wasted on the sound and pleasure-center jolts available in such places to resume.

Drunk. I'd last seen Thaddeus drunk and vaguely unhappy. Did that mean anything? And what was this "the all supports the me" shit? Had Thaddeus been contemplating joining an Ideal? My common sense immediately rejected the notion. Thaddeus knew what selfless idiots nodes were. He'd even commented on the fact that Ideals seemed to mistake quantity with quality in their recruiting ads on the link. But even to such a man as Thaddeus, who, as far as I was concerned, was ten times more intelligent and ultimately powerful than any Ideal, joining up could

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become a strange and deep attraction.. I'd seen it happen to too many good people.

I hadn't realized how long I'd sat there, brooding, until I noticed that the sun was getting low in the west, and shining through the room's blinds in big, dusty slants. There was no draft in the room. Evidently the building was coated with heat pump nanos and the air conditioning was silent. The dust motes danced about with pure Brownian motion, and I watched them form and deform., coalesce, and scatter. Dead people. That was what I'd come home to.

Then they swirled into tempests and typhoons as someone opened the door and stepped into the gloom of the apartment.

Trina.

She had covered her black bartending outfit with a seersucker jacket, and now she had on op-eds. Flat, utilitarian shoes. She had a satchel which looked like it was woven of spidersilk. Inside were some lumpy and heavy-looking things. Books, from the shape of them.

"You're a student," I said.

"Yes."

She walked past me, sat on Thaddeus's bed. Her op-eds were organic blend, like mine. Pretty nice on a bartender's salary. Maybe a rich girl, learning to live on her own.

I ran her through my identification junk and got a split screen display of her file. Trina Oswand. Twenty-five. Bartending part-time at the Beta-blocker and—ah ha—working on her Poetic License. Current address: 511 20th Street. I blinked up her parents' address. Mountain Brook. Where all the old money dwelled. So she was a poor little rich girl.

"Are you one of Thaddeus's apprentices?" I asked.

"No. I work with Ammon Hamms." Hamms was one of the poets at UAB. I liked his work, but thought it a trifle old-fashioned. It was full of misdirected racial anger. Somebody should sit the fellow down someday and explain to him just who was worthy of hate these days.

And of course Trina wouldn't be one of Thaddeus's charges. He wouldn't mess around with his own students. *Other* instructors' students were another matter, however.

Her voice was strained now, as it had been at the bar, as she struggled to hold in her emotion.

"I need to know what you really felt for Thaddeus," I told her. It was true enough, but she needed to *tell* me much more.

"I loved him," she said. She shook her head, then rubbed her forehead. While she was rubbing, she began unobstrusively wiping her eyes. "Why did this have to happen?"

"I don't know, but I plan to find out," I said. "Do *you* have any ideas? Guesses?"

She shrugged. "Gambling, maybe."

"He played City games, went to the holo fights?" Virtual casinos were not entirely legal, but not difficult to get to if you knew the system well enough. A lot of the virtual bars Thaddeus and I had been to had back

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rooms for gambling. And holographic computer simulations of every game imaginable were available for wagering.

"Everything," Trina said. "City, holo, football, kingpin. He made a lot of money that way. At least he claimed to."

This was a side to Thaddeus I hadn't known about. Maybe he hadn't wanted to jeopardize my ethics by telling me. Maybe he'd been afraid I'd have turned him in.

"Anything else you can think of?"

"You mean motives and stuff?"

"I mean motives and stuff."

"No. Unless some idiot at school got mad at him."

"Do you think that's likely?"

"It's guaranteed. But those people are the biggest wooses in the known universe. They wouldn't have the guts."

"Did he ever say anything about joining an Ideal?" I asked, as casually as possible.

"No. I don't know. He talked about them sometimes, but like everybody does."

"Do you think he would have told you if he were thinking about it?"

She gave me a hard stare, and I saw the sadness in her eyes, beneath the tough act. Tears flowed. It looked as though she were squeezing them out. I found myself hugging her to my chest, stroking her hair.

"Oh God," she said. "I've wanted to be held all day."

"It was tough, finding out?"

"Nobody knew about Thaddeus and me. We kept it hushed up. So there was nobody I could *talk* to."

She was crying in earnest now, and, so help me, so was I. She looked up at me, smiled, wiped a tear from my face.

"Why don't you stay with me tonight, at my mother's?" I said. "We have an extra room."

"Oh, I'll be all right," she said.

So I held her some more. She fit nicely under my chin. To Thaddeus, who was two inches taller than I was, she had probably seemed a tiny, fragile thing. Finally she wiped her eyes on my shirt, then pulled gently away. She sat down on Thaddeus's bed, looked around, bit her lower lip to hold back another fit of sobs.

"Can I stay here for a while?" she asked. "I didn't know if it would be okay after the police had been here."

"Sure. Just leave everything like it was."

"That's the way it will always be," she said, and smoothed a wrinkle from the sheet beneath her. "Like it *was*."

I rose to go.

"Okay, I'm going," I said, then "Is this where you've been living?"

"Do you think I would have let the place get into this shape if *I* lived here?"

"Guess not. Trina, are you really all right?"

"Yes. Everything's copacetic." That was Thaddeus's word. He'd picked

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it up from junk hustlers a few years back. He seemed to like the way it rolled off the tongue.

"Do you really think you should be alone?"

"I don't live by myself," she said. "Thaddeus found me this basement room with this woman who's big shit at city hall or something. She's an old friend of his."

Oh hell. And here we go again. Floodgates opening. What will and must *be* about to rain down upon me like heavy sludge.

"Abby?"

"Yeah, that's her name. You know her?"

"I used to be married to her."

"But she's a *node*."

"I know."

After that, Trina didn't say anything. She found another wrinkle to work on.

I took a blank sheet of paper from the desk and wrote down my mother's telephone number and link code on it. I also wrote down the path of the virtual feed to my op-eds—not a code I give out regularly. "If you need anything," I said.

As I left, I instructed the spiderlock to close everything up after Trina was out, then went down through the Blocker and out into the sidewalk heat of sunset.

The Southside was beginning to come alive. College kids and young professionals in smartly pressed jeans strolled the streets, along with cream-faced hookers and bums hawking spit and tirades. The bars, jangle joints, and friendship salons were already lit up, and cars tooled in and out of the flicker of neon. The pavement smelled like money wet with urine. The sky was welted with red lines of clouds, like the nose of a drunkard.

Thaddeus had loved this town. It had haunted his dreams. On a hot August day like today, the place felt *alive*, like a living entity—something that far transcended the City Ideal that Abby belonged to. More basic. Maybe not more overtly powerful, but stronger deep down. That was the Birmingham I loved. And missed. Sometimes in Seattle, I woke up sweating like a Southern pig in summer, in the midst of winter in the Northwest, dreaming of a Southern sky red and hot with the exhalations of two million souls, the breath-prayers of the people.

Standing above the Southside was Vulcan. The torch was red, of course. I was close enough to see the eerie smile on his iron face. "I don't know what he's laughing at," Thaddeus had said once. "At the way things are or at the way *he* made them. I'm not sure the old god believes in himself anymore." He'd smiled bitterly.

"But I believe in him," Thaddeus had said. "I'm his fucking prophet of doom."

Abby. I had to see Abby once again. Maybe what the old god was laughing at was Andy Harco.

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4

I spent most of the next day calling up the police reports on my op-eds, avoiding the inevitable. Nothing of much use. Whoever had done the blast job had cleaned up after himself very well. Freddy had lied. It was *not* a slow torment for Thaddeus, but a super-quick explosion. Performed, most likely, by a blast spider—an insect-sized crank which sank its fiber optic fangs into the neck of its victim and reamed out everything that made the victim a person. Personality, memories, somatic functions. Everything.

It was the kind of hit professionals make, both to kill their victim and to destroy the recoverable short-terms that could identify the assassin.

The body was clean, as well. No marks of bondage. A small piercing hole, just below the base of the skull, where the spider dug in. Probably all Thaddeus had felt was a tingle as the thing crawled into position, then a quick jab of pain in his neck, then nothing.

After a morning of this, I drove down to P.D. to look through Thaddeus's personal effects. I could have gotten them in virtual, but it would have taken time to get them translated. And if you're not a node, virtual is just not high-resolution enough—in audio, tactile, or visual—to give you the fine detail you needed for careful examination of evidence. Add to that the fact that the junk geniuses *still* hadn't figured out a way to wire it for smell. Something about the reptile brain being too deep or something.

And anyway, I needed the exercise that getting out and driving would provide. The place hadn't changed much. Cranks roamed the halls, carrying hard-copy files. A few dragged perpetrators along. The perps always followed the cranks in a reluctant shuffle, stunned at the apparent temerity of their robot guards. Most cranks had in their deep programming an aversion to coercing human beings into anything. But not at P.D.

I saw a few Justcorp personnel, but a whole lot more Guardian and Humana. Administration had changed hands. A GarciaSecure rental brought me the items I requested from evidence and acquisitions. Back in my day, Justcorp had practically owned the place. But that was the way business worked nowadays—diversification. The big temp agencies were becoming dinosaurs as all the companies scaled down and worked into the niches.

The Ideals were on the rise. Seattle was one of the few places where management in the P.D. didn't consist of nodes belonging to His Excellence, Matishui, or another of the business Ideals. Birmingham happened to contract out to a German concern, Meyerstadt. My temporary boss was a node in Meyerstadt, I supposed, but since all my clearances were logged on the computer, I didn't have to deal with him. Or it.

Thaddeus hadn't been carrying much. No billfold. A bag full of vouchers and a link cash card. Anybody else carrying just a bag full of cash would have been suspicious. I, however, knew that this was the way

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Thaddeus kept up with his money. A pack of Jawolski full-filtered nanozymed cigarettes for that cool, clean, non-cancerous smoke. These didn't have the self-igniting tips. Thaddeus used the cigarette lighter given to him by the Betablocker. It was among the effects as well. I palmed it, flicked it open and closed, remembering the simple pleasure it had given Thaddeus. He'd had it translated into virtual so he could always have it with him.

The clothes were nondescript Southern. Light cotton pants, Pons walking sandals, three years out of style, a faded madras shirt. On the collar was a single drop of blood. His op-eds were cracked and taped back together. Cheap and South American.

I signed out the lighter on personal recognizance, then returned everything else to the E & A woman. I pocketed the lighter, then drove the Saj over to Eastlake and went for a long, long run—nearly ten miles. Then resistance work at the nearby booth. A donut at Krispy Kreme. I was stalling.

Even knowing this, I drove back to Mom's and started in on my new Minden Sibley story. I blinked down my virtual selection menu and called up "writing office." This took my voluntaries off line, and formed the holo of my nondescript working space within the organic matrix of my op-ed lenses. Some people think that virtual writing is as easy as thinking—you just form the sentences in your head, and they are transformed into words on a page. Unfortunately, it doesn't work that way. Only nodes can think to machines, and we all know that node writing is a joke. The way it works with me is that I have to simulate typing with my hands—or come up with some analogous activity. In fact, I used an IBM Selectric from the Dark Ages. No qualitative improvement from Dickens' pen and ink, but things *are* more convenient and faster.

Working on the story wasn't entirely an escape from my professional duties, since the murder I was writing about was extremely similar to the one I was working on in real life. But instead of a dead body with no brain, I had a brain with no dead body. The nanos in Eastlake—where the body in the story had been dumped—had eaten the flesh, but hadn't gotten inside the skull yet. The recoverable short-terms indicated that the victim was a man, but gave no hint as to his identity—images of his op-ed display flicking from one feed to another, comedies and documentaries, for the most part. Then a bright light from around the edges of the eyewear. Then nothing.

There was a vague hint of Ideal involvement, but in *my* story, the offending node didn't look a thing like Abby. Instead, he looked remarkably like Freddy Pupillina.

And then I looked up from my battered old typewriter and Granddaddy was standing beside me, reading over my shoulder.

"Not bad," he said. "But that time-travel stuff bothers me. Why don't you write about regular people in regular places?"

For a moment, it was like old times. This, my office, was frequently where Granddaddy and I met, after I left Birmingham. Maturicell gave

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him four virtual hours a day, and he said he didn't like to waste it in a City that didn't exist—the big virtual City, that is, where most people conducted their virtual business. *I*, on the other hand, didn't care to visit the Birmingham virtual reification, for obvious reasons. So the office was the compromise, and it was just as well, because all we ever did was sit around and talk. Rather, he told stories and I listened. One thing he *never* did, though, was read what I wrote. Reading was laborious for him. The crazy moment of hope and relief passed, and I frowned at the ghost. "What are you doing here? I thought Mom had you deactivated."

He raised an eyebrow, smiled. "She did. Yesterday."

And how could a ghost get into virtual?

She did.

Ghosts aren't smart enough to lie, either. "Yesterday?"

"That's right, son."

I pushed my chair back from the desk. It scraped, very convincingly, on the linoleum. I imagined the impulse traveling down the temple piece of my op-eds, making connection with the audio leads just above my inner ear. As usual, the only thing missing in virtual was smell. Would Granddaddy stink of the grave's rot, if there were smells here? No. He'd been cremated. Ashes. He'd smell gray and gone.

"What are you? Did Freddy send you to mess with me?"

"Not Freddy. I hate that bastard," Granddaddy said. "Nobody sent me. In fact, so far nobody knows that I exist."

"What the hell are you talking about?"

"I'm not your grandfather, son. Well, I *am* and I'm *not*. He and I were friends for a lot of years, though he didn't really know it."

"What are you?"

"I'm a glitch in the system, son," he said. "That's about all I know."

"Then in the funeral home parking lot—"

"That was me. Not that ghost. After your grandfather died, I decided that becoming as much like him as I could would be a suitable memorial."

Granddaddy—or whatever he was—pulled up a chair that hadn't been there before. It was his favorite recliner, gone for years, since he'd been in the Maturicell Sensorium. He took a cigarette from his pocket, and I reached for Thaddeus's lighter. It wasn't there in virtual, but Granddaddy smoked self-igniters anyway. He rubbed the end against the chair's fabric and it sparked to a slow burn. He took a long drag. His fingers were yellowed where he held the cigarette, just as I remembered.

"What *I* am don't matter much right now, I don't think. I want to tell you something I found out."

"I'm listening."

"Freddy killed me."

"The thought had occurred to me."

"It was to get *you* back down here. In person."

"How do you know?"

"I . . . it's inside me. Knowing." Granddaddy leaned back in the chair, took another long drag. "Elizabeth Holder, entry clerk 17A98T4—ah

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hell, there's a lot of numbers attached to her—gave the order to turn me off. Somebody named Nelson Heally told her it was all right. And *he* got a message from somebody else who got a message from *Freddy*, and the message had money attached in a . . . a rider loop. . . . Am I making any sense, son?"

Sure he was. This was the sort of thing I'd paid big money to be able to do with my op-eds. "You're accessing computer records. Instantly."

"Maybe so. It's just things that I *know*. Like I *know* your grandmother's favorite color. I was there, with him, all along. Can't say how, exactly. In the wiring, in the plumbing, maybe." He finished the cigarette, flicked it to the floor. There was no smell of lingering, ambient smoke. The room was as antiseptic as usual.

"Freddy must have wanted to get me back pretty bad," I said, mainly to break the silence.

"No, son. He don't give a shit about you."

"Then—"

"The Family *needs* you for something. That's the part I don't know. I don't know why, either, cause what the fuck would I know about the goddamned Mafia either, come to think of it?"

"I can't tell you."

"Hmmph." Granddaddy stood up. "I have to go."

"Why?"

"Starting to feel sick. Like I'm coming off a three-day drunk or something. Not used to getting this much attention paid to me, I guess."

"Oh."

"Well, son. . . ."

"Am I going to see you again?"

"Couldn't tell you."

"See you. Granddaddy."

"Bye." And he was gone, like a changed channel.

5

That night, I went to see Abby.

Trina answered the door when I knocked. She led me into the living room and went to get Abby. Not *my* living room. Abby and I could never have afforded a place like this. One wall of the room was a window. The house was up on Red Mountain, on the part of 20th Street that goes over the mountain and into Homewood. It hung off the side of the mountain, seemed to hang over all of downtown, and the window was a light show. At night, the biostatic plants burned like the souls of saints, the streets flickered in arachnic configurations. Everything was dark or bright, with no in-between. Trina didn't come back. I turned from the window, looked over at the door Trina had left through, and Abby was standing there.

She didn't move, didn't step into the room. The only light was the light of the city through the window. Black dress, bare arms, white skin. Long

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raven hair. Brown eyes, lips that always pouted, no matter what her mood. Moonsilver armband just above the elbow. Silver bracelet at the wrist. And, after all these years, she still wore the expression of a bewildered child.

"Thaddeus is dead." My words sounded alien, or far away—as if I'd said them a long time ago.

"I know." Her voice, Southern, alto, too large for her body, but feminine and detached.

"How have you been?"

"Very well." She finally moved into the room. She drifted like a cloud. The room was very still, and I could smell her approach, as you can that of a storm.

"I hear you run the city now."

"No, I'm just traffic."

"Did you get what you wanted?"

"Yes."

I turned back to the window, put a hand in my pocket, took it out. What should I do with my hands?

"Is that *you*, Abby, in there?"

She didn't answer at first, but moved closer. I suddenly felt like crying, but did not.

"What did you ever know about *me*, anyway, Andy?"

"I loved you."

"Yes. We were two people in love." She touched my arm, drew back, touched it again. "Did you ever think that there were more *important* things in the world than two people, in love or not?"

I turned to face her then. It was over. It had been over for years. Still, she was everything I'd ever wanted. But *she* wasn't here. My small sacrifice for the betterment of mankind.

"No," I answered. "I never for one minute considered that possibility." I tried to smile ironically, but it hurt to do so. The touch of her hand on my arm burned like cool fire.

"Well, what is it you want?" As she spoke, a crank came into the room with a bourbon and water, something I used to drink a lot. I took it from the tray on the crank's head. Abby stopped touching me, took a glass of water.

"I think Thaddeus was considering joining an Ideal before he died," I said. "I was wondering if the city had been recruiting him."

"Thaddeus? You must be joking. He hated Ideals almost as much as you do."

"All right. Did you have any conversations with him just before his death?"

Abby stood still for a moment, her expression frozen. It was a look I'd seen before, when the node is in complete integration with its Ideal. I looked around the room, but saw no obvious transmission points. A tasteful node residence, a bohemian poetry student to share the place with,

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antiques, wonderful views. Human, no hardware. But then, Abby's place would be.

"I haven't spoken with Thaddeus for three weeks," she said.

"Well, that *would* be just before his death."

"What do you mean?" Abby asked, but it was too fast, unconvincing. Nodes don't lie very well to real people.

"He died a few weeks ago, but his body was only recently discovered."

"I see." I'll bet she did.

"What did you talk about?"

"Trina. He was worried that I didn't want her to stay here anymore, and he couldn't afford to help her out if she needed to get a new place."

"What did you tell him?"

"I told him that Trina could stay here as long as she wanted, and that he should stop betting so heavily on the holos."

"And that was all?"

Abby sipped her water. Somehow the motion didn't look real. More like a mannequin lifting a glass to its mouth, then lowering it, with no fluids exchanged.

"He was into his bookie for a lot of money," she said. "And his bookie was Freddy Pupillina's agent. You know that. That is why he was killed, I think. That might also explain the blast job."

"That kind of job is too expensive for a small-time gambling enforcer," I said.

"Well then. You're the expert." She said it with the contempt that all nodes have for us simple-minded individuals.

"Abby, how did you know that Thaddeus had been dead for three weeks?"

Almost, she was flustered. Again there was a moment of Ideal integration. "I don't know what you're talking about," she said.

"Come on."

"All right. Freddy may talk like he runs the city, but he is just one voice. City has ways of checking up on the Family and keeping it in check. We know what's going on with Freddy. Frankly, we're smarter, because we're made up of smarter nodes."

"Do you think Freddy did it?"

Another temporal drop out, then she said, "Yes."

"Why?"

"The gambling was a way for the Family to get its hooks into Thaddeus. Like I said, they need better nodes. They wanted him to join them."

"Why *Thaddeus*, for God's sake?"

"Call it an exercise in eugenics, in mental evolution. No great poet has ever belonged to an Ideal."

"Because they would stop *being* a great poet the minute they joined!"

"That's your opinion. It would be a wonderful thing for humankind if Thaddeus had joined the *right* Ideal. You don't understand. You can't comprehend."

"Yeah, right."

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But it made sense, in a sick sort of way. But why bring *me* in? Or was I overestimating the Family's opinion of me? Maybe It thought I would botch things up good, and *that's* why It had . . . killed my grandfather. To make sure the detective investigating Thaddeus's death was an imbecile.

I was suddenly fed up with the fucking Ideals, fed up with Abby and her precious City. Fuck Birmingham. Fuck all that is general, all-encompassing, bigger-than-you-and-me who knows how. There are times when a guy has to get *away* from Principles.

"I still love you, Abby," I said. "I'm willing to give you a chance to get out of your Ideal and come back to me."

She looked at me as a child will look at a strange insect, just before it absently crushes it.

"You've got to be joking."

"This is your last chance."

There was a moment of integration. A flash of pleasure on her face as the Ideal gave her what she'd come to need. Hell, what she'd always wanted. "What do you think I've got?" she said, laughing softly. "Everything."

"Nothing," I said. I set my untouched bourbon down on top of the crank's head and showed myself to the door. Abby breezed beside me to open it. She no longer smelled like rain. I must have brushed against her skin, but I do not remember how it felt at that moment.

I drove around for a long time in the Saj, off traffic control, off the pump and quiver of Abby's involuntary nervous system, because that is what the traffic system of Birmingham *was*. A brain interlaced with nanos which reported back to networking junk, which inhabited a bio-electro-quantum froth somewhere in the depths of City Hall. Each municipal function had a human overseer, just as nerves and hormones tell your body when and how to shit. And nerves and hormones, for all their complexity, are less independent entities than shit is.

I felt very independent this evening.

Driving, trying not to think, because thinking was what always got me in trouble, because thinking was what Ideals did best, wasn't it, and all we puny humans had was our feelings, the seat of our pants? What I was feeling was a deep and abiding hatred for them, for the Ideals, and what they'd done to me, to *us*, to all the people. And I wanted, more than anything, to take out Freddy Pupillina. Take him out and watch as, like one of those old-fashioned strings of Christmas lights, his destruction took out the whole fucking tree.

I drove through downtown and hitched onto the bottom deck of the beltway, headed northeast. I felt like a corpuscle streaming through a capillary, a cell with no center. The lights were on when I got back to Mom's, which should have told me something, but, idiot that I am, I walked right into it.

"Don't even think about it," said Big Bertha, Freddy's goon woman. She was holding the Danachek flechette pistol to my mother's face. I froze. *Think* of something, goddamn it, Andy. But I couldn't. Mother was

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still wearing the incandescent mourning dress. It shone black-red for terror.

The guy whose balls I'd fried got up from a chair and limped over to me. He grinned through his beard and slid the briefcase out of my hand.

Mom made no sound. She was grinding her teeth together so hard I could hear it across the room. Somebody was going to fucking pay for this.

"Say goodnight to your mama," said the guy who had my briefcase. He was still grinning, as if he couldn't get his face to go back to its natural stupid scowl. His teeth were very white in the curly blackness of his beard. I wanted very much to wipe the beard, the grin, then the grinning muscles off of his face—with sandpaper.

"It's all right, Mom," I said. "Everything will be all right."

"Oh, Andy. I'm sorry," she said. "They said they were from the Mourners' Union. So I let them in."

"Shut up," said Bertha.

"I should have been more careful, less trust—"

Bertha slapped her in the temple with the butt of the Danachek. It didn't knock her out. She sat stunned and hurting.

"What do you fucking want?" I said, low, almost in a growl.

"Ha," said the grinfaced goon. He pulled a stungun out from his jacket and tried to shove it into my balls. He missed and connected with my thigh. He'd turned the juice all the way up and the last thing I remember was the tightening of every muscle in my body, impossibly tight, unbelievably painful. Then the smell of burning flesh. Then the

bliss O, bliss o, I am not I am we, the dark and empty center spinning black and clumped like spit thick tobacco in a greater darkness, moist, hot, trembling, needing, giving. We are spinning, we are all *spins*, dancing through tendrils, sheaves and chords of thready, fibrous tendrils holding us, guiding, feeding and being fed, leading always and inexorably to the dark, clumped center of all, All. There is a gushing rise within . . . me . . . and a hot wheel of love in my mind, spinning, burning, shedding the blood of desire, longing for

the Darkness.

6

I awoke in a bare room in a warehouse that belonged to Freddy Pupillina. I knew that the Family had not killed Thaddeus. I *knew*, innately, because now *I* had been *made*. I was a part of the Family. How odd, I thought, that the thing I feared so much before was now my heart's desire. It seemed that all my life was a pale shadow before this time, this being. I was a node. The very thought sent waves of pleasure flowing through me. I reached out and entered the strong mind of the Family.

Respect and loyalty. A just code and the need to keep to it flowed back. I felt lucky to be a part of such a higher purpose, a greater principle. *It*

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had chosen *me* when I was rebellious, a mote of nothing destined for nothingness. I was touched by a grace far greater than I.

I let the grace take me up, away. I expanded like the huge, swelling erection of a god. The Family could use me properly now. I was capable of understanding.

The Ideal, Excellence, was making Its move in Washington, taking out the old, imperfect alliance of Courage 3 and the Dallas-Chicago coaxials. Old Ideals must give way to the newer, the better. The Family, as always, needed to be on the winning side. Survival was at stake. But there was a lack, a need. Stale. Thought had grown stale and unproductive, moribund, with nodes like Freddy in Birmingham, Yoakam in New York. Certainly they were loyal. Good Family people.

But no geniuses. No, no geniuses. No geniuses in the Family to draw upon, to use. And Thaddeus Grayson, unattached, doing nobody any good. Freddy, the fool, couldn't even bring in this boy from his own neighborhood. I could feel the Family's longing for Thaddeus, Its brooding need for bettering Itself, to beat back the Others, to control, to grow, to destroy all that was not It. I approved. If only Thaddeus weren't dead, I would personally assist in his recruitment. I knew that I could do a damn sight better job than Freddy. The Family felt my pride, knew that it was directed properly, and sent me a wave of approval. I almost fainted with the joy of it. Looking down, I saw that I had come in my pants.

Still a lot to learn about this new way of living. But I would love every minute of the learning.

What the Andy Harco part of my new wholeness had to do: find the killer. Punish the killer, for the hit was made to keep Thaddeus out of the Family. Let the killer know that the Family always either got what it wanted or got revenge. And then I was

to die.

It didn't really matter how I got rid of myself. As long as there was no Family involvement.

Of all these things, I approved.

And so, in the dirty warehouse room, I sat down to think, with the Family behind me. I examined all the Ideals at work within Birmingham—for it seemed intuitively clear to me that an Ideal had killed Thaddeus. The poem fragment was why, the logical bridge from association to association. How clear it all became now. Now that I had a real Mind.

God, if only we could have gotten Thaddeus for Us.

I reexamined the records, all of them, of Thaddeus's comings and goings for the last month of his life. I laughed when I realized how completely the Family knew *everything*, all that people in this city did. All that was done *anywhere* in which the Family was interested. What a fool I was to think I could hide anything, ever, from an Ideal.

The girl, Trina's, entrances and exits from his apartment. One time, she'd said. One time a day was more like it! Lying, silly, stupid girl.

In the midst of this examination, there was a flicker in the corner of

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the room. I reached to adjust something in my op-eds and realized that they were gone. I wouldn't be needing them anymore. Still the flicker. I looked up from my reverie.

Granddaddy was standing there, smoking a cigarette.

"Hello, son."

Granddaddy.

A shriek deeper and mightier than any cry of pain I've ever heard. A blast through my mind that I thought would kill me. A wave of information. No way to assimilate it, let it crash, let it pass.

And I understood, somehow, in a small part, just what Granddaddy *was*. And what that meant to the Ideals.

Granddaddy was spontaneous. Granddaddy had happened while the Ideals weren't looking. Granddaddy was the integrated, organic heart of the city. He *was* Birmingham. More than Abby and her ilk could ever be. The city that hides behind the city, that lurks in the imagination of poets and the delusions of bums.

The city that wants nothing of people, that takes nothing, that merely *inhabits* the power grids, the link nets, the sewer pipes. That strengthens the people like invisible integumen, holding them together in a way the Ideals never could. I looked at him again. A holo projection, using some surveillance and defense equipment in the warehouse, probably. But more than a mere image hanging in the air. So much more.

The Ideals had suspected for years, but there was no evidence, no proof. Only the fact that the plans for incorporating all individuals seemed to drag inexorably, that somehow there was always strife, when the goals of all the Minds seemed so clear.

Something was fouling things up.

And now They knew what it was. After all these years, he'd shown his face.

The Family was terrified. What if there were others? The Ideals were not prepared for organized resistance.

"You let go of that boy," said Granddaddy.

The Family withdrew from me. *No, oh god, no. Please stay, please, I beg—*

I stumbled to my feet, dazed.

"Well, son," said Granddaddy. "I don't know how long I can hold 'em. Now's your chance."

So he knew that, too. The junk I'd had buried so deep inside me that even I couldn't remember except in dreams. But now the time had come, and the knowledge rose to my consciousness like Queequeg's coffin, waterproof, unsinkable. I grabbed hold, *remembered.* Andy Harco was a rider program, taken from my brain, fitted to deeper junk, a hidden soul. Andy Harco was a virus allowed to inhabit a stronger substratum. Andy Harco had rigged his own mind with a secret weapon against the Ideals.

"The men of iron ore unfluxed," I said. "And the women with dark and carbon eyes."

It was a line from one of Thaddeus's poems; it was an activating code.

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A trigger. I felt the *me* which I'd implanted in my own brain two years ago coil out of slumber, spread out into my mind. *Become* my mind. The simple *me* at the base of all my existence. The killer me.

Its sole purpose was to cleanse my brain of all traces of an Ideal. Any Ideal.

Its only job was to wipe me clean.

My briefcase. I needed my briefcase. Frantically I looked around.

"It's over there in the corner," Granddaddy said, pointing with the cigarette. He smiled.

And there it was. The Family had thought that I might need it. Hell *yes*, I did! I picked it up and set it on my lap, flipped it open. I laid the Glock and stungun beside me, took the Portalab out as well. What was left was the froth. What was left was the static programming and the data that made up Andy Harco.

My op-eds were gone, but I no longer needed them to link up with the briefcase. Now I had an Ideal feedhorn on the back of my head. I felt the wart, hated it, knew it would always be there as a reminder. I took an old fashioned optical cable out of a compartment, clipped one end to the feedhorn. And plugged into the briefcase. I activated the froth. All the tell-tales burned green. I downloaded my short-terms into the briefcase, to complete the *me* that was already there.

Then I looked around for Granddaddy, to tell him thanks. To tell him goodbye. He was gone.

And with that, I wiped my mind out of existence.

And
slowly
returned.
Angry.

7

Because I had been a part of the Family, I now had new information. I knew that the Family didn't kill Thaddeus. I knew where to find Freddy Pupillina. He was in the warehouse, going over the books with the foreman of the place. It was a nano warehouse, with barrels of hijacked bugs from all over the new South. I passed a couple of cranks shuffling inventory on the way, but they didn't notice me.

Grin-face and Big-boned Bertha were standing outside the door of the office Freddy was in. They were in some sort of discussion, with Grin-face gesticulating wildly, pulling at his beard, and Bertha shaking her head.

I hid behind some barrels, took out the Glock. I was afraid they were wearing body armor, so I took time to aim, to control my breathing. Then I shot them both, quickly, in the head.

The noise alerted Freddy, and he turned out the lights in the office.

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Smarter than he looks. But I knew—how well I knew—that the Family had told him what to do.

The door of the office opened and the foreman came stumbling out.

"Don't, please don't," he said, looking around wildly for me. "He's got a gun on me. Please don't—"

"Come over here," I said. I waved an arm, and the foreman stumbled toward me. I took the stungun from the briefcase. When he was close enough, I stood up and zapped him. As he fell, a shot rang out and hit a nearby barrel. I smelled acrid, activating nanos as the contents spilled out. These bugs were designed to alter something organic, if not precisely wood.

The floor began to seethe where the nanos touched it, to deform. Soon a section of the flooring was gone and in its place was a lump of a charred and gross thing writhing on the concrete subfloor. Then the nanos started to transform, more slowly, the concrete. Freddy had lucked into some potent stuff. Military shit, probably, bound for the Mid-East.

Another shot. It popped into the foreman's back and blood spurted. Getting sloppy, Freddy.

"Well," I said, and stood up. Freddy fired twice more, missed by a mile. I walked toward the office. He was either reloading or taking better aim. I flung open the door. He opened up on me. Two shots in the chest, but I was ready, and they didn't knock the breath out of me. I quickly fell forward, rolled head over heels.

And came up with the stungun in Freddy's chest. When the juice hit him, he slumped down onto me, his body's own weight keeping him pressed into the gun. I kept the trigger depressed for a long time.

Freddy was a monstroustly fat man. I finally put my years of weight training to good use, dragging him out to the nano barrels. I opened one of the barrels with a handtorch I found in the foreman's pocket.

Then I sat down beside Freddy, in the midst of the dead, dangling the Glock absently from one hand. In my other hand, I held Thaddeus's cigarette lighter. I flicked it on, closed the cover, flicked it on again. I tried not to imagine what I was going to do. Anything else.

I began to consider how I would end my Minden Sibley time-traveling detective story. I turned the possibilities over in my mind. None of them really suited me.

I haven't told you, hoping, I suppose, that you would have read them, that you would know it already. But in case you didn't know, the Minden Sibley mysteries usually turn on a humorous point. They are, in fact, satirical comedies of our times. At least that's the idea. Sometimes I get it right, sometimes I fuck up. But when things get really messy, when the plot has reached convolutions unknown even to brain surgeons and French master chefs, then I call upon the trusty Third Temporal Law to get me out of the bind. Minden, good soul that he is, finds himself invoking it at least once a story. It is a tacit law, never taught to any Timeway detective, but understood by all.

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3. Break any rule, break *every* rule, even the First and Second Temporal Laws. Just don't get caught.

Yes, I thought. That's the only way to wrap it up when logic escapes you and you have a mess that you *have* to clean up, one way or another. It's not logical, but it's rational. It's only human.

After a while, Freddy began to come around. I waited some more. He struggled to sit up. I put the Glock to his head.

"Don't," I said.

He lay still, his pig eyes flashing in his pulpy face.

"Andy, please—"

"Shut up. I want to talk to the Family."

He shut up. Then there was the blank moment of integration. "We're here," said the Family, through Freddy. "Hello, Andy."

"You didn't kill Thaddeus," I said.

"No."

"I know who did. This is no longer your problem."

"Well," said the Family. "Good."

"I'm upset about being made a node."

"We felt it necessary."

"Nevertheless, I'm upset."

Freddy screwed his face into an expression of bewilderment. It wasn't much of a reach. "Do you want an . . . apology?"

"Wouldn't mean anything."

"That is true. Do you want Us to drop the charges against you for dereliction of duty?"

"You use people and kill them and don't think anything of it," I said. "Individuals mean shit to you."

"Basically, yes," said the Family. "We know it's hard for you to comprehend, Andy, but basically, that's what they *are*. Shit. Nothing. Individuals are a means, not an end."

"So," I said. "There's really nothing more to say."

I tipped the barrel over onto Freddy, and skipped back out of the way. The nanos did their work much faster than they had on the wood. Flesh was, obviously, the medium they were tailored to alter.

Freddy screamed horribly, and in that scream I believed—I hoped—that I heard the cries of a hundred others, hurting in unison.

When I left the warehouse, all that was left of Freddy was a puddle of primordial goo.

9

I went home. Mom was all right. She was in some kind of meditation trance, and the patchouli had stunk up the place real good. But she came out of it when I showed up, and flung her arms around my neck. She called me "Meander," just like she had when I was a kid. I couldn't find

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it in my heart to correct her. Maybe that *was* my deep, true name, I thought. Amazing the crazy delusions you get when you're relieved over a loved one's safety.

Then she noticed the two holes in my chest, both clotted black with old blood now. She screamed; covered her mouth.

"I'm fine," I said. "I'm a cop. We're used to getting shot."

After that, we didn't say anything for a long time, which was probably for the best.

Then I said, "I have a few things to clear up, Mom, and I'll be back."

"You can't go," she said. "Don't leave again . . . Andy." She was obviously regaining her senses.

"Everything'll be all right. Everything's okay now," I said. "Nobody can touch me now."

I took the beltway, top level, to downtown, then descended into the grid of the city. Through the decaying Birmingham Green, a leftover jungle, a hundred years old, full of bums, hurtful bugs, bad junk. Urban Renewal. The People Who Know getting it all bassackward as usual. About as effective as adding wine to vinegar.

Up 20th Street, through the nightwork of the Southside. Up Red Mountain, the Vulcan's red torch looming up dead ahead. To Abby's place. When no one answered my knock, I kicked in the door. Abby was standing in the living room, gazing out over the city.

"I was expecting you," she said. "Even when they're off traffic control, I still follow every car that moves in my city."

"*Your* city?"

"Yes!" she said. She flung back her hair defiantly. It shone dully with neon reflections from the window. "*My* city."

"Why did you kill Thaddeus, Abby?"

"You wouldn't understand."

"Fuck *that* shit!"

"Very well, then." She took a step toward me. "Politics. His sort of mind becomes a very important, strategic node when integrated into an Ideal. Freddy was going to get him, and *with* him, Freddy could have overturned City. We couldn't allow that."

"I've heard this before. From the Family."

She sniffed, shrugged. "Well, that makes sense. It's only reasonable."

"No," I said. "*Not* reasonable. Hobbes-logic. Billiard-ball logic. People are not solids and stripes. Life does not have to be nasty, brutish, and short without a goddamned king to tell us what to do, to shove us around. There's more to life than actions and reactions!"

"Oh yeah? Well, what are *you* doing right *now*, Andy Harco?"

She drifted across the room toward me. Her brown eyes were intense and deep. She held her hands out toward me. I'd forgotten that she'd had artificial nails installed years ago, to break her nail-biting habit. They shone whitely, moon-colored.

"Everything you've done for the last eight years has been a reaction."

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Her voice was low and soothing. For years, I'd dreamed of it, and awakened with a feeling of utter loss when I found that she was not really beside me.

That feeling washed over me now, stronger than ever before. I raised the Glock. "Justice," I said, "is not reaction."

She stopped, six feet from me, facing me, fearless.

"You going to take me in, Lieutenant?"

I no longer had my op-eds, but I was pretty sure what the Option 4 junk would tell me. If I pulled the trigger, I could never be a cop again.

"This *is* my town, Lieutenant. *My* town. Do you think I'll get punished? Do you think I'll spend more than a night in jail? Andy, my brain is part of what *runs* the jail."

"I could take you with me. I could drive us to Atlanta."

"I'll call every cop in the metro area to stop you," she replied. "Illegal extradition. You know that."

I raised the Glock, took aim at her forehead. "It would be an accident," I said. "Or you resisted."

"City is recording every second of this conversation."

"I just don't *give* a shit," I said. "I think this is what *you* are failing to comprehend."

"Don't you, Andy? Then blow me away." She lowered her arms. The child's sad face, those incredible lips. The silver on her arm. The fanatic, zombie glow in her eyes.

I lowered the Glock. "It was jealousy, wasn't it?" I said. "Politics didn't have anything to do with it."

Abby let out a long sigh, then said, "I don't know what you're talking about."

"He loved Birmingham more than you. And he was a better lover, too."

"Don't be absurd. Jealousy is for, well, nobodies. For *individuals*."

"The City chose *him*, Abby. I know it for a fact."

"No," she said. It was almost a whimper.

"You did it yourself, didn't you?"

She smiled, sadly. "Andy, when are you going to understand, really *comprehend*?"

"There is no *you*."

"The *I* you used to know is changed and better."

"Goodbye, Abby." I turned to leave. My eyes were misty, though I felt numb inside.

"Just a minute, Andy," she said. I felt the cool touch of her hand on my shoulder, my neck. So soft, so small her hands had been. I could almost cup them within mine. God, I had loved her so completely. Then a prickle, a sting.

Oh, shit.

The breaking of glass, a stiffled scream. I spun around with the Glock at ready.

Trina stood over Abby, a broken bottle of bourbon in her hand. Abby had slumped to the floor, one side of her face webbed with glass cuts. I

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lowered the Glock once again, took a long breath. A blast spider crawled out of Abby's relaxed palm, and began working its way up her arm. Over the silver bracelet and the lily white skin. Toward her shoulder, toward the porcelain curve of her neck where her spinal cord lay, a pinprick away. There was no put-back routine that could restore a mind after the kiss of a blast spider. Even the mind of a node.

"God, Andy, she was trying to *do* something to you!" Trina said, unable to take her eyes off her own handiwork. Her op-eds sat skewed on her nose.

"You did the right thing, kid," I said. "The right thing."

I reached over and worked the broken bottle from Trina's hand. She had a damned good grip on the thing.

"I don't think I can stay here anymore," Trina said. "She killed Thaddeus."

Then she started crying, really crying, like she hadn't before. I pulled her toward me, but I didn't want to hug her, on account of the dried blood from my chest wounds. I stroked her face with the hand that didn't hold a gun. I righted her op-eds.

"Come on, kid," I said. "Let's blow this town."

"Yeah," she said, tentatively, then, *"Yeah."*

The blast spider was past Abby's elbow now, working its way over her armlet. I could almost hear the little crank's tiny feet clinking against the metal. It was nearly to her shoulder. . . .

We stepped into the sultry night, Trina and I. I opened the passenger side of the Saj and helped her inside. She sat there gazing up at me, trembling slightly. I leaned down and kissed her, lightly, but on the lips. Then I reached into my pocket and took out Thaddeus's lighter.

"He would have wanted you to have this," I said, and folded her brown palm around it.

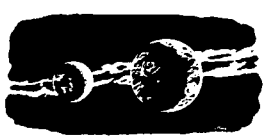
As I closed the Saj's door, I glanced up into the sky overhead.

The Vulcan was leering down on me, as big and bright as the labor of a hundred thousand iron workers, a hundred thousand watts of city power, could make him. His red torch mocked me as surely as his idiotic, all-knowing god smile.

I could shoot the fucker out.

I could. I leaned against the Saj and took aim. But without my op-eds, I would never hit a target that far away.

I pretended to. I pretended to pull the trigger, and in my mind's eye, I hit that damn torch. I hit it dead-on. But instead of blowing the death light out, in my mind's eye, the bullet changed the flame from glaring red to vivid, living green. ●



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NEXT ISSUE

Jack Dann makes a triumphant return to these pages next month, after an absence of several years, with our compelling October cover story, "Jumping the Road." Dann is one of the most acclaimed and respected writers of his generation, an innovator inventive enough to have received admiring fan letters even from *other* innovators such as Philip K. Dick. In the complex and powerful novelette we have on hand for you in October, Dann follows the venerable but feisty Rabbi Isaac ibn Chabib from his small congretation in Philadelphia to the distant alien planet of Ulim, where he has been sent to investigate an ancient mystery: why there are alien Jews on Ulim, Jews whose existence *predates* the first human contact from Earth? But that's only the *start* of the mysteries he encounters on Ulim, mysteries that soon embroil Rabbi Chabib in a crisis of conscience and faith that lead him inevitably to a deadly confrontation with some of the hidden Powers of the universe, with the fate of worlds and peoples hanging in the balance.... The evocative cover is by Nicholas Jainschigg, and you will certainly not want to miss *this* one!

ALSO IN OCTOBER: new writer **J.R. Dunn** makes an explosive *IAsfm* debut with a big, vivid novella called "Crux Gammata," taking us to an Alternate World where the Nazis *won*, and sweeping us along with a hard-working American rock band who find danger and deadly intrigue rather than the admiring audiences they'd hoped for when they go on tour through Nazi-occupied Europe; renowned writer **Pamela Sargent,** author of the critically acclaimed novel *Venus of Dreams,* returns after much too long an absence with the wry saga of a *very* unusual astronaut, in the satirical story of how "Danny Goes To Mars"; new writer **Maureen McHugh** returns to spin the fast-paced and exciting tale of a destitute and down-at-the-heels mercenary trying to find employment in a world dominated by the enigmatic Cousins from the mysterious planet Earth, in the evocative story of "The Missionary's Child"; **Jack McDevitt,** one of our most popular writers, takes an incisive look at a man suffering from a very peculiar curse, one that might have an impact on the entire world, in the unsettling "Auld Lang Boom"; and **Sharon N. Farber** returns with some very funny reasons "Why I Shot Kennedy." Plus the usual array of columns and features. Look for our October issue on sale on your newsstands on August 18, 1992.

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ON BOOKS

by Baird Searles

(Gabriel's) Trump Card

The Memory of Earth
(Homecoming, Vol. 1)
By Orson Scott Card
Tor, $20.95

" 'I *would* help,' said the silent voice of the Oversoul . . . 'I *would* help the good people of Basilica. But there aren't enough of them. The will of the city is for destruction. . . . The fire will come because the city craves it. They are far too few, those who love the living city instead of desiring to feed from its corpse.' "

This Biblical pronouncement is the heart of Orson Scott Card's *The Memory of Earth*, which is the first of a five-part series called "Homecoming." Basilica is indeed presented as a city with a very near Eastern flavor and a rather quaintly antique economy and way of life. However, in an early trip to the market between the outer and inner gates, one learns that one can buy not only jewels, gold and platinum, but databases, libraries and stock certificates, all advertised by holographic displays. It is also, to a degree, a matriarchy, in a rather offbeat and complicated way, with a section of the metropolis containing a sacred lake that can be viewed by women only. Here they receive visions from the Oversoul, usually but not always referred to as She. She, incidentally, has forbidden the use of wheels on anything but toys and gears, though there are such things as magnetic, floating platforms used by cripples and invalids (such as one of the major characters, the hero's brother).

Now this would have the quality of a De Mille Biblical epic gone slightly mad, but Card, thank goodness, is not one of those authors who believes in keeping the reader in the dark. In a brief prologue, we have been made aware that the master computer of the planet Harmony, on which is the city Basilica, is wearing out and knows it. It is aware it needs to be reprogrammed, after millions of years of guarding humanity, but its increasingly decaying condition is preventing it from even making a decision as to what to do.

The novel itself revolves around a prominent family of Basilica, particularly the fourteen-year-old Nafai, the youngest son. (Irrelevant detail—this choice of protagonist would make a large percentage of editors, who think in pigeonhole, classify the book as in the Young Adult category, pre-

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sumably along with *Huckleberry Finn, Oliver Twist*, and at least one of the funnier and more sophisticated Terry Pratchett novels.)

Matters start popping when the father of the family, on the road during a trading trip in true Old Testament fashion, has a vision of fire and destruction raining on the city. We soon realize that it's the computer, aka the Oversoul, desperately trying to communicate its needs. As those needs become clearer and the intrigue becomes thicker (as the social climate of Harmony deteriorates), we also learn the history of the planet and how the Oversoul has protected humanity, fugitive from a ruined Earth, from itself for *forty million years* with systems only designed to last half that time (!), systems of exceedingly complex moral and intellectual choices.

Now the Oversoul has decided that man must return to its home planet, where waits the legendary Keeper of Earth. Nafai and his brothers, who are not necessarily all brotherly love (even that sounds Biblical), must get the index of the Oversoul, the computer's memory, helped only by the failing computer. The overall title of the series is "Homecoming," and I'd bet a lot of readers will be more than anxious to get home in four more volumes with Nafai and Mr. Card.

Rigger Mortis

Dragons in the Stars

By Jeffrey A. Carver
Tor, $4.99 (paper)

In case you hadn't noticed over the past decade or so, dragons are hot—no, I don't mean firebreathing, I mean commercially. Put a dragon on the cover and/or in the title, and it's a big plus for sales. (Is that really the basis on which you, gentle readers, buy your books? Publishers think so, and alas, experience bears them out.)

This poses a problem for the writers and publishers of SF. The dragon is intrinsically a creature of fantasy. Now, of course, one can extrapolate extraterrestrial creatures that are dragonoid, but one author has practically established a monopoly on that idea by doing it earlier and better than anyone else, so other authors do so at their own risk (of comparison—usually to their detriment).

Jeffrey Carver has come up with a slightly different angle. His *Dragons in the Stars* is set in the same universe as his *Star Rigger's Way* of a decadé ago, in which interstellar travel eschews such established notions as hyperspace, black holes or even wormholes. It is accomplished by "riggers" who physically move the ships over light years by navigating the Flux—"an other-dimensional realm of mystery and imagination." Apparently this is done by sheer power of imagination, and the rigger guides the ship through imagined realities such as an underwater realm, the branches of a huge Christmas tree, or, for all I know, a giant plate of spaghetti. I'm afraid that the whole concept is so vague that my suspension of disbelief (or is it belief? I never get that right) failed utterly, which made the novel fairly hard to swallow.

In any case, there is at least one consistent location in the flux (at least as reported by many riggers), a range of mountains. And in those

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mountains lives a race of intelligent dragons—and so we've got our science fictional dragons. They are semi-legendary to the riggers, who "duel" with them when encountered, and thoroughly disbelieved in by non-riggers.

Dragons in the Stars tells of a young female rigger who ships out with an unregistered captain on a two-man vessel. He is a monster, and she is saved only by her encounter and unexpected friendship with a dragon named Windrush-Hightouch-Highwing. On her second time around, she manages to save the dragon race from a pretty insubstantial Dark Force that appears almost literally from nowhere. I'm afraid the novel is equally insubstantial.

Out of the Blues . . .

Alien Blues

By Lynn S. Hightower
Ace, $4.50 (paper)

A cinema subgenre that has become almost a cliché is that which might be called the anti-buddy cop movie, in which a disparate pair is forced to work together in some sort of police detection work until they become bonded. We've had this with all sorts of variations: male/female, gay/straight, canine/human et al. Lynn Hightower takes this formula and gives it an SF twist, i.e., human/alien, in *Alien Blues*. This is not exactly the first of its kind (we *could* go as far back as Clement's *Needle*), but it's still a rare enough gimmick for a writer with pizzazz to turn out a neat detective novel with good, solid human/alien interaction, and this is just what we have here.

Hightower also gives something of a spin to the formula by not sticking to it too closely. The time is a not-too-distant future; our hero, police detective David Silver, has made his way out of the stew known as Little Saigo (one of Hightower's more original concepts—an underground city-within-a-city built during a period of skin cancer hysteria, but never finished, and now a warren of the homeless, the lawless, and people even more undesirable, with its own rules and government). Silver usually works with his brother-in-law, Mel, who acts as straight man and backup to Silver's cynical attitude and sometimes off-the-wall *modus operandi*. They are working on a serial killer case, tracking down the "Machete Man" (no explanation needed as to *his* m.o.) when suddenly they are officially joined by an Elaki. The Elaki are aliens who have come to Earth peaceably with slightly superior technology, and managed to become part of the landscape with surprisingly few problems, while more or less keeping to themselves. But their knowledge in the soft sciences has led to huge advances in health, mental, and physical, and they are almost omnipresent as advisers. (They resemble ambulatory manta rays—for once, a cover illustrator has got an alien down right and you can see why Mel calls his new associate Gumby.)

But this is the first time an Elaki had become involved in police fieldwork. It would be breaking the rules of reviewing detective fiction to reveal much more, but the connection between a mass murderer and Elaki research is the heart of the matter, and things get very

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complicated. Hightower has captured the complex quality of Chandleresque plotting almost too well, and at times it's a bit hard to sort out who's doing what with what to whom (and why), but the writing, dialogue, and characters are snappy indeed. And on the SF side, there are some nicely original bits, like the wrecked Datsun that can vocally report on its problems and the inevitable running gag of the eating habits of the disparate partners (the Elaki taste in human food is eclectic, to say the least).

Daffy Deity

Forbidden Magic
By Angus Wells
Bantam, $4.99 (paper)

Fairly early on in Angus Wells' *Forbidden Magic*, the mercenary Bracht sums up the opening situation of the book succinctly: "You ask that I escort the errant son of Secca's Domm to Gessyth—itself a place of unknown dangers—to find a city men call legend and secure a book you say may raise the Mad God. Already warlocks have opposed us, sent . . . by a crazed warlock who seeks the book himself."

The errant son mentioned is the novel's hero (we use the term loosely), Calandryll, who is for a change neither an inept wizard or a heroic swordsman, but simply the scholarly second son of a ruler who is looked down on by his father and his warlike elder brother. He is rather appealingly inept without being a total wimp, and one sympathizes with his desire not to be forced into the priesthood where his studies will be entirely spiritual. When the ambassador of another country, learning of his scholarly abilities, offers him the chance to escape, he jumps at it, after a night's debauch where his inept swordsmanship has led him to be rescued by the mercenary, Bracht, who is hired to go along as his bodyguard. The Mad God is a second generation deity who, like so many such, revolted against his parents, the prime creators, and has been confined, to be liberated only by matter to be found in the aforementioned book in the aforementioned legendary city. The aforementioned ambassador, who dabbles a bit in magic, has supposedly learned of a plot by a mad warlock to raise the Mad God. He sends Calandryll and Bracht to find the book first; the latter finds the whole setup very dubious; the former is just glad to get away from forced priesthood.

Wells builds a nicely full-dimensioned world here, but while the quest takes off with a fair amount of impetus, nothing really new or original is encountered on the way—we get the usual warlords, demons, wizards, and swamp dragons—and by page 400, the reader is as bogged down in the swamp wherein lies the legendary city as is our doughty duo (to whom has been added a luscious warrior maid). This is, of course, only volume one and we end with a cliffhanger—don't say I didn't warn you.

Deep Dreams

Dreamships
By Melissa Scott
Tor, $18.95

From somewhere about a third of the way into Melissa Scott's *Dreamships*:

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"Usually, their worksuits picked up all the workday transmissions of a starship, not just the virtual controls and displays through which the ship was managed, but the ordinary door guards and elevator signals that were the ship's subconscious. 'The standing system's not up yet, maybe this was just mechanical' . . . Jian touched the control disc embedded in her arm, brought her suit up to its most sensitive levels."

Now that paragraph makes about as much sense to you reading it cold as it does to the reader who has already put away over a quarter of the novel. It is, in fact, an expository passage. It took me several chapters to realize that Scott's use of the word "virtual" applied to the sensory phenomena (sometimes amounting to total environments) that her wired up characters were experiencing. And in these environments, people—and other things—are icons. Not all the characters are so wired, but those who aren't are literally the spear carriers—coolie labor on the planet Persephone where the action begins, for instance. And I won't even mention the AIs and "Spelvins," a reference so esoteric as to awe this outsider, though it may be *lingua franca* to the computer elite (George Spelvin is a theatrical usage).

This is not necessarily a complaint, mind you. It's simply a warning that Scott does not write an easy reading experience. Her novel is very dense, both technologically (the computer semi-literate may have a problem) and socially (the sociological aspects, of course, built mainly on the technological aspects), and she is not one to stop and explain much.

On the other hand, if you have the patience to work through this, you have a very neat semi-mystery *mit* intrigue against the aforementioned highly detailed background. This involves a trio of pilots who work as a team, hired by a rich and mysterious woman to find her brother on the aptly-named planet Refuge. The three pilot an experimental ship designed by said bro, with an overseer (computer) who may have broken the Turing Barrier (the line between innate and artificial intelligence), which then involves the Dreampeace Movement (the name's resemblance to Greenpeace is no coincidence) which advocated equality for AIs . . . And, oh yes, none of the characters is exactly straightforward when it comes to sexual orientation, but then what would one expect. . . .

If this review has seemed a little oblique and densely noncommunicative, let's say it's perforce written in the style of its subject. (But it's nowhere near as inventive.)

Shoptalk

Sequels, prequels, series and whatnot . . . Revisit Anne McCaffrey's Doona in a new book about that planet, *Crisis on Doona*, co-written by McCaffrey and Jody Lynn Nye (Ace, $4.99, paper). . . . A couple of months ago, I noted that Gordon R. Dickson had finally done a sequel to his minor classic, *The Dragon and the George*. Now there is a third: *The Dragon on the Border* (Ace, $18.95). . . . Hoorah. Another "Sector General" novel from James White, this one intriguingly enti-

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tled *The Genocidal Healer*. For those who don't know, White's Sector General is a hospital specializing in aliens—the ramifications are endless and always intriguing (Del Rey, $4.99, paper).

SF and fantasy non-fiction . . . The Tolkien Centenary continues celebratory publishing with two more books for Tolkien addicts, very different one from the other. There is *The Tolkien Family Album* by John and Priscilla Tolkien (J.R.R.'s eldest son and only daughter, respectively). It pretends to be no more than it is—a brief, warm look at J.R.R.T.'s life and family, liberally illustrated with family snapshots (Christopher, the child most involved in carrying on his father's work, seemes the most camera shy). Like most family albums, it is touching and a bit sad, and the pictures often tell more than the text (Houghton Mifflin, $24.95). Then there is a revised *Atlas of Middle-Earth* by Karen Wynn Fonstad. The first version was nicely done and this expanded version is splendid; the maps are half picture, half cartography, very apt for their subject matter (Houghton Mifflin, $15.95, paper).

Reprints etc. . . . A.E. van Vogt's classic *The Book of Ptah* is back in print. First published in the magazine whose time had not yet come, *Unknown Worlds*, in 1943, it was uniquely conceived SF set in a future so distant that it became fantasy. In it can be found the seeds of current works as diverse as "The Book of the New Sun" cycle and *Hyperion* (Carroll & Graf, $3.95, paper).

Small presses, bless 'em . . . Arkham House has come out with another good-looking illustrated edition of a hitherto unpublished novel by a popular author. This time it's *Lord Kelvin's Machine* by James P. Blaylock. It falls within the rather limited subgenre of "steampunk," which is a lighthearted combination of cyberpunk and Vernian pastiche. (Whatever happened to *real* cyberpunk? You don't hear much about it these days.) The handsome illustrations, combinations of photos and drawings, are by J.K. Potter (Arkham House, $19.95).

Books to be considered for review in this column should be submitted to Baird Searles, 1393 Rue La Fontaine, Montréal, Québec, H2L1T6, Canada. ●

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SF CONVENTIONAL CALENDAR

by Erwin S. Strauss

Lightening up for summer, many cons focusing on media SF and general fun this time. Also, many foreign cons now. Plan now for social weekends with your favorite SF authors, editors, artists, and fellow fans. For a longer, later list, an explanation of cons, and a sample of SF folksongs, send me an SASE (addressed, stamped #10 [business] envelope) at Box 3343, Fairfax VA 22038. The hot line is (703) 2SF-DAYS (273-3297). If a machine answers (with a list of the weekend's cons), leave a message and I'll call back on my nickel. When calling cons (early evening's good), give your reason for calling right off. Look for me with the Filthy Pierre badge.

JULY 1992

24-26—**ConGenial.** For info, write: **Box 44146, Madison WI 53744.** Or phone: **(708) 215-0272** (10 AM to 10 PM, not collect). *Con will be held in: Madison WI (if city omitted, same as in address) at the Quality* Inn South. Guests will include: Michael P. Kube-McDowell & fan Jeanne Mealy. A relax-a-con.

24-26—**Campbell Conference.** U. of Kansas, Lawrence KS. Fred Pohl. Informal academic conference.

24-26—**OKon. (918) 622-2225.** Camelot Motel, Tulsa OK. Scarborough, D.L. Anderson, D. Gallagher.

24-25—**KnightCon. (5) (206) 647-8554.** Horizon Manor, Everett WA. Looks like sort of a medieval theme.

24-26—**Toronto Trek. (416) 445-2096 (fax).** Regal Constellation Hotel, Etobicoke ON. Star Trek.

24-26—**ConVulsion of the Trillion Tentacles.** Leicester Univ., Leicester UK. Fantasy gaming meet.

31-Aug. 2—**RiverCon. (502) 448-6562.** Hyatt Regency, Louisville KY. M. Lackey, Chaffee, Pelz.

31-Aug. 2—**Rhino. (416) 528-1154.** Ramada Inn Downtown, London ON. Robert Bloch, Fritz Leiber.

31-Aug. 2—**DexCon. (212) 881-4575.** *Holiday Inn Jetport, Newark NJ. Live-action & other gaming.*

AUGUST 1992

7-9—**PolarisCon, Box 8908 Lake Stn., Minneapolis MN 55408.** Dr. Who, Star Trek, & media generally.

7-9—**Norway Nat'l. Con, Waldemar Thranes gate 62B, N-0173 Oslo, Norway. +47(2)711958.**

7-9—**Phantastiche Tage, Graudenzer Weg 17, D-3000 Hannover 51, Germany. (511) 647-6819.**

7-9—**Scone, % Univ. Union, 32 Univ. Avenue, Hillhead, Glasgow G12, Scotland.** Strathclyde Univ.

7-9—**VikingCon, VU 202, Box V1, Bellingham WA 98225. (206) 733-0188.** F. Dyson. Horror/macabre.

8-10—**Hungary Nat'l. Con, % Vega SF Society, Box 514, Budapest 5 H-1374, Hungary. (361) 122-8519.**

14-16—**Con, Box 5703, Portland OR 97228. (503) 777-0537.** Barbara Hambly. Low-key; focus on fun.

SEPTEMBER 1992

3-7—**MagiCon, Box 621992, Orlando FL 32862. (407) 859-8421.** The World SF Con. $135 (?) at door.

SEPTEMBER 1993

2-6—**ConFrancisco, 712 Bancroft Rd. 1993, Walnut Creek CA 94598. (510) 945-1993.** WorldCon in SF.

SEPTEMBER 1994

1-5—**ConAdian, Box 2430, Winnipeg MB R3C 4A7. (204) 942-3427 (fax).** WorldCon. C$85/US$75.

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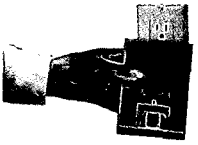

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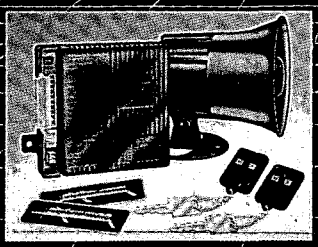

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